The Way of These Women

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THE WAY OF THESE WOMEN

He sprang past her to the middle of the room. FRONTISPIECE.

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THE WAY OF THESE WOMEN

BY

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

AUTHOR OF "THE DOUBLE TRAITOR," "MR. GREX OF MONTE CARLO," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

C. H. TAFFS

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THE WAY OF THESE WOMEN

CHAPTER I

There were only three passengers who alighted at Wickombe Annerley station from the five-thirty train. Two of them were, however, in their way, people of consequence. From the first-class smoking carriage next the engine stepped Henry Aynesworth, Marquis of Lakenham, six foot two and a half, broad and burly, with features stained by the suns of tropical countries and coarsened by a career of excesses so regettably flagrant that, notwithstanding the remains of his fortune and his ancient name, he was heard of more often in the circles of Bohemia than in the great world to which by birth he belonged. He wore a light flannel suit, and a straw hat adorned with the colors of a noted cricket club. He was smoking a large cigar, and he stood by while his servant collected his belongings, watching the proceedings with an air of prosperous arrogance wholly and objectionably British. He was forty-two years of age and he looked older. He had a ruddy brown complexion, a stiff, fair mustache and a heavy jaw. His eyes were a little watery but his carriage still retained traces of his soldier training. His voice was always raised a note or two louder than was actually necessary.

"Anything here from Annerley Court?" he asked the station-master.

A long-coated footman who was on his way to the other end of the platform paused and touched his hat.

"The motor is here, my lord," he said. "Sir Jermyn did not expect you, I think, until the later train. We had orders to meet the half-past seven."

"Changed my mind at the last moment," Lord Lakenham declared. "Fact is, it was so hot in town I was glad to get away. Have you come to meet any one else?"

"A young lady, sir," the footman replied, edging off.

"Well, there'll be room for me, I dare say," the Marquis remarked. "What's Sir Jermyn doing to-day? Cricket, eh?"

"Sir Jermyn is playing against Yorkshire, my lord. The match should be over in good time."

The Marquis nodded and strolled towards the exit. The footman hurried to the other end of the platform, where two young ladies were standing in front of a small pile of luggage, from which a maid was collecting their belongings. The younger one was only a child, with fair, freckled face, rather a large mouth, and a very earnest expression. Her elder sister — there was no mistaking their relationship — was exceedingly dainty and charming. Her eyes were a trifle dark for her complexion, her hair fair and wavy, her complexion pale but flawless. She was dressed in the smartest of white linen traveling gowns, with white silk stockings and black shoes. Her voice when she addressed the footman, to whom her sister had called her attention, was singularly soft.

"Are you from Annerley Court?" she inquired.

The footman touched his hat.

"Yes, miss," he answered. "Sir Jermyn desired me to present his compliments and to say that he was exceedingly sorry he was not able to come to the station. He said that he would explain immediately upon your arrival. He hopes to be at the Court as soon as we are. There is a cart waiting for the luggage and for your maid, and a motor for you and the gentleman, miss."

For the first time she glanced down the platform and noticed the disappearing form of her fellow passenger.

"There is some one else going to Annerley Court, then?"

The footman, who was assisting with the baggage, turned around for a moment.

"Yes, miss," he replied. "Lord Lakenham has arrived by the same train."

The footman was now entirely intent upon superintending the removal of the luggage, and incidentally ingratiating himself with the young lady's maid, of whose appearance he approved. The station-master had escorted his distinguished arrival to the motor-car, the solitary porter was busy hoisting luggage to the top of the luggage cart, and the child had wandered off to admire the roses in the station-master's garden. It was a little country station on a branch line, with a row of white palings, a single seat, a tiny shed, and on the other side of the single line of metals, a thick wood. There was no one there to witness what, in its way, was almost a tragedy. The girl, whom an entire press and a not ungenerous profession had done

their best to spoil, had forgotten to act. She stood quite still, gazing at the faint line of smoke which marked the track of the departing train as though it were carrying away her last hope. All the soft, delicate girlishness of her features seemed to have vanished. Her mouth was set, her eyes distended with fear. There was no one of her admirers who would have recognized her at that moment. All the little color which she possessed seemed to have been drawn from her face, all the life and lissome grace to have passed from her limbs. As the departing train vanished around the distant curve, she gazed about her wildly, as though seeking for some way of escape. She shrank as though instinctively away from the little shed outside which the motor-car was waiting.

"The luggage is quite all right, madame," the footman announced, turning round. "If you and the young lady will be so good as to follow me?"

The child, who had clambered up the white palings, sprang lightly down.

"Aren't you glad it's a car, Sybil?" she exclaimed. "It will be just lovely riding in the open air after that stuffy train. Come along."

The young lady to whom she appealed nerved herself for an effort. She let fall her traveling veil of white gauze and with her hand in her sister's followed the footman down the platform, through the wooden shed and out into the little circular space where a very handsome motor-car was waiting for them. Lord Lakenham, who was standing by its side, raised his hat. He was in one of his very best moods, for he threw away his cigar.

"We are to be fellow passengers to Annerley Court,

I hear," he said. "May I introduce myself? My name is Lakenham. Will you allow me?"

She stepped into the car with a slight inclination of the head. For a moment or two Lord Lakenham seemed to forget his manners. The child passed by him unaided. He stood as though turned to stone, staring at the half-concealed countenance of the young lady, who was already ensconced in a corner of the car.

"Are you not coming?" she asked calmly. "There is plenty of room."

Lord Lakenham recovered himself with a little effort.

"Of course I am," he answered. "I — well, I forgot where I was for a moment. Now we're all right."

He took the seat opposite the two girls and the car glided off. His eyes still seemed to be seeking to penetrate that closely drawn veil.

"Delicious, this is, after the train, isn't it?" he remarked. "May I not have the privilege of knowing your name? We are to be fellow-guests at Annerley, I believe, so I shall only be anticipating a few minutes."

"My name is Cluley," she told him, "and this is my little sister — Mary Cluley. We are only making a very brief visit to Annerley."

"Cluley," he repeated, thoughtfully. "Seems a familiar name to me, somehow. I wonder why? . . . Ah! of course, there's Sybil Cluley, the girl at the Imperial Theatre, who seems to have turned the heads of half the men in London."

"My name is Sybil Cluley," she said quietly.

Lord Lakenham slapped his knee and chuckled.

"By Jove, then, that accounts for it!" he exclaimed.

"I knew I'd seen you before. Came over me for a certainty directly you got into the motor, only I couldn't imagine where. You were mixed up with something in my mind and I couldn't work it out. I am delighted to know you, Miss Cluley. Had the pleasure of seeing you act, of course."

The girl inclined her head. Her sister leaned forward from her seat.

"Nearly every one, wherever we go, knows Sybil by sight," she told Lord Lakenham confidentially. "It's so funny sometimes when we are out in the streets together. People stop and turn round, and in the shops I can often hear them whispering and telling one another who Sybil is. Have you seen 'The Tangled Web'?"

"Several times," Lord Lakenham assured her. "Parts of it are a trifle too clever for me but it's a jolly good show, all the same. Your sister's the making of it, to my mind."

"Sybil is ripping!" Mary declared. "Everybody says so. It's quite her best part. The manager told me himself the other day that he didn't think there was any one else in London who could have created it as she has done."

Lord Lakenham smiled tolerantly.

"I should imagine he was quite right," he agreed. "I expect you're keen to grow up and go on the stage yourself, eh?"

The child looked across at her sister doubtfully. Sybil Cluley was lying back in her corner seat with half-closed eyes, as though anxious to escape as much as possible from the conversation. She opened them now, however, wide enough.

"Mary will never go upon the stage," she said firmly. "I have made other plans for her."

The child laughed gayly enough, yet with a note of regret.

"Sybil's saving all her money," she explained to her companion, "so that soon after I leave school we can travel together for a time and then live somewhere down in the country. I don't believe she's a bit fond of acting, really. Isn't it stupid!"

Lord Lakenham stroked his stubbly moustache and gazed a little curiously at the eager-faced child who sat opposite to him.

"I have heard a good many young ladies of your sister's age talk like that," he declared, "especially after the first excitement of their success has worn off. It doesn't last, though. There's no profession in the world, they say, like the stage for holding one."

Mary seemed doubtful.

"Sybil doesn't often change her mind," she told him. "In fact she's what I should call stubborn about most things."

"Nice character your young sister's giving you," Lord Lakenham said, turning to his elder companion with a smile.

Sybil shrugged her shoulders slightly. She seemed curiously anxious to remain in the background.

"Mary doesn't know everything," she murmured, "nor does she always mean exactly what she says."

"The natural proclivity of her sex asserting itself in youth!" Lord Lakenham remarked, didactically. "What?"

Sybil only smiled very faintly and looked away with the air of one whom the conversation had ceased

to interest. The car had climbed a hill and was rushing down now into the valley. Mary was leaning back in her seat with a keen air of enjoyment.

"Isn't it lovely to be in the country again!" she cried. "Look at those glorious woods, Sybil! Are we anywhere near Sir Jermyn's house, Lord Lakenham?"

"We shall turn in at the gates in a few moments," the Marquis replied. "You can see them straight ahead there. Nice little place of its sort, Annerley Court. Have you ever been down before, Miss Cluley?" he added, turning to the girl by his side.

She shook her head.

"Never," she answered. "Sir Jermyn has asked me once or twice but I have not been able to leave the theatre. Now I have a short vacation and we are going to read his new play together. Mine is really a business visit, you see."

Lord Lakenham nodded with a sudden understanding. The coming of Miss Sybil Cluley to Annerley Court had been puzzling him immensely.

"Why, of course!" he exclaimed. "I read in one of the papers only this morning that Jermyn had a new play almost finished, and that you were to take the leading part. Clever chap, Jermyn, in his way. Have you known him long, Miss Cluley?"

"I have known Sir Jermyn for about a year," she answered quietly. "He is certainly very clever, indeed. I have played in a short sketch he wrote some time ago, at the *Haymarket*."

"I remember it quite well," Lord Lakenham declared. "Dismal sort of affair it was, too! I can't make out why Jermyn never ends up anything he

writes, happily. It may be artistic, and all that, but I'm hanged if I like it!"

She raised her eyebrows very slightly.

"Do you believe, then," she asked, "that everything in life should end happily?"

"I am afraid I am one of those obvious sort of persons who want it to in the books I read and the plays I go to see," he admitted. "What do you say, Miss Mary? Don't you want the fairy prince to marry the right girl, and all that sort of thing, at the end of the story, eh?"

"Of course I do," the child answered, confidently. "So does every one."

"Not always," Lord Lakenham objected. "Our host doesn't, for one."

"Sir Jermyn is an artist," Sybil murmured.

"Daresay he is," Lord Lakenham assented. "All the same, I'd like to see him a little more cheerful sometimes. I don't see the use of writing about problems that never solve themselves, or marriages that always go wrong, or lovers who never come together. Waste of time, I call it. Sort of cousin of mine, Jermyn, you know, Miss Cluley."

She accepted the information without any great sign of interest. They had turned off the main road now, through some plain iron gates, and were crossing a park dotted here and there with dwarfed oak trees. Mary clapped her hands.

"Deer!" she cried, with enthusiasm. "Do you see, Sybil, there are actually deer! I wonder if they are very wild?"

"Not a bit of it," Lord Lakenham assured her. "They'd be all right, anyhow, at this time of the year.

Eat biscuits out of your hand, I daresay. We'll try them to-morrow. I haven't been here for ages," he went on, looking around him. "Ripping little golf course one could make here. Do you play golf, Miss Cluley?"

She shook her head.

"I haven't time for that sort of thing," she told him. "Mary plays games for us both. I am quite contented if I can get an hour's walk every morning."

Some note in her tone — or was it the curve of her head as she leaned sideways to look up into the woods? — stirred in him once more that curious sense of a half-awakened memory. It was more than curiosity which he felt — it was an interest which had almost an emotional side.

"It's a rum thing!" he exclaimed, meditatively, with his eyes fixed upon her. "Every now and then, Miss Cluley, I get a sort of an idea that I've seen you before, not on the stage at all."

She did not answer him for a moment. Unseen, her right hand was gripping the leather strap by her side. She kept her eyes fixed upon the house, which had just come into sight. If only she could control her voice! If only she could check his efforts at recollection!

"I think it most unlikely, Lord Lakenham," she said coldly. "I go out very little and I have few friends."

"And I am quite sure that we never knew anybody who was a marquis before, did we?" Mary chimed in, with a triumphant sense of administering a *coup de grâce* to the subject. "Is this really the house? Oh, Sybil, isn't it lovely!"

"Beautiful, dear," Sybil assented.

Lord Lakenham eyed the structure disparagingly.

"Not much of a place," he said. "I don't care about these plain Georgian mansions. Never seen Lakenham, by the bye, have you, Miss Cluley?"

She shook her head.

"I do not even know where it is."

He laughed boisterously.

"That's a nasty one for me," he declared. "Rather a show place, you know, Miss Cluley. Never mind, I hope you'll see it some day. There's old Jermyn got here first, after all. I wonder who the dickens he's got to play hostess? I'm hanged if I don't believe — why, it's Lucille!"

CHAPTER II

Jermyn Annerley was, in the parlance of the gossiping journalists of the day, a very interesting figure in Society. He was tall, and he had the good looks which go with clean-cut features a little on the large side, a very sensitive mouth, and deep-set, keen, but rather introspective gray eyes. He had done exceedingly well at college but had distinguished himself chiefly in athletics. Nothing, the sporting critics declared, but a certain lack of enthusiasm had prevented him from becoming one of the most brilliant amateur batsmen of the day. He had actually, however, had the astounding strength of will to give up cricket altogether for two years which he spent in traveling, and a curious inclination to regard the game as a recreation rather than as an all-engrossing pursuit had more than once mystified the little body of gentlemen who from the neighborhood of St. John's Wood controlled the cricket destinies of their country. He had never entered a profession, and although he had gone out to South Africa as a matter of course, the army as a career presented no attractions to him. He had written a novel which was too clever to be successful, a few articles in the reviews which had attracted a great deal of attention, and the most popular Society comedy of the day. He was known to be rich; he was unmarried, charming to all women but obviously unimpressionable.

The worst thing that had been said about him was that he was a prig.

He stood now at the open door, waiting to receive his guests, composed and yet a little eager as his eyes followed the approach of the car. The woman who stood by his side watched him curiously from underneath the lace of the parasol which she held over her head. From the first she had been suspicious of the coming of this girl.

"Who is Lucille?" Sybil Cluley asked, as the automobile glided around the last bend of the avenue.

"Duchesse de Sayers," Lord Lakenham replied. "She is a sort of cousin of ours — was an Aynesworth, you know. She married a Frenchman who turned out a regular rotter, and divorced him. She hates her name and hates her title, so nearly every one calls her Lucille. Great pal of Jermyn's."

The car drew up in front of the house. Jermyn held out both his hands to Sybil as he assisted her to alight.

"This is delightful!" he exclaimed. "I shall never be able to make sufficient apologies for not having been at the station to receive you, but if there is a greater autocrat in this world than your enemy the call-boy, it is the captain of a county cricket team. Mary, you've grown since last week, but you've got to kiss me all the same because I'm your host. Glad to see you, Lakenham. We didn't expect you till the later train. Miss Cluley," he went on, "I want to present you to my far-away cousin, who is good enough to be hostess for me sometimes — the Duchesse de Sayers."

"I am very glad to welcome you to Annerley," Lucille said slowly, as she held out her hand. "I have

been anxious to meet you ever since I saw your wonderful performance in Jermyn's play."

"Miss Cluley and I are much too modest for that sort of thing," Jermyn laughed. "There is some tea on the other side of the house, in the gardens. I hope that you want yours, Mary, as badly as I do. Come along."

There was some further interchange of conventional speeches and they all moved slowly together into the great hall. Jermyn led the way across the white stone flags, smooth with age and shining like marble, past the broad staircase, to where at the end of a corridor, through an open door, was a vista of terraced gardens, cool and brilliant.

"I do hope that you will like it here," he whispered in Sybil's ear. "I have been looking forward so much to your visit."

She raised her eyes to his and he was suddenly struck with the new thing which he saw there. It was the look of a frightened animal, the weak craving protection from the strong.

"It will be lovely," she answered. "I am sure that it will be lovely."

"You have felt the heat, I am afraid? It must have been a terribly trying journey."

She shook her head.

"It was nothing," she replied. "I had a good many things to see to before I could get away, and traveling generally gives me a headache. Directly I sit down in your garden it will have passed."

"My garden," he smiled, "shall be like the garden of the Eastern sage. When you open the gate and step inside, all manner of evil things shall pass away."

The corridor was hung with portraits. Right over the door through which they were to pass, the face of a man in scarlet uniform frowned down upon them.

"Who is that?" she asked, a little sharply.

He glanced up carelessly.

"A great-uncle — the third Marquis of Lakenham — Lakenham's grandfather, by the bye."

She shivered distinctly. Once more he caught the look in her eyes which had puzzled him.

"I am afraid," he remarked, smiling, "that you don't like the look of my ancestors!"

She glanced cautiously around. The others had paused for a moment while Mary made friends with some dogs.

"I do not like Lord Lakenham," she whispered. "No, don't look so horrified, please. Of course he hasn't been rude to me, or anything of that sort, but I heard of him once — I didn't like what I heard. He — somehow he frightens me."

Jermyn looked genuinely distressed.

"My dear Sybil," he exclaimed, "I am so sorry! It is quite a fluke his being here. I had no idea, even, that he was coming until yesterday. He is on his way to Scotland. To-morrow I will give him a hint."

She shook her head.

"You mustn't," she begged. "He would guess at once. Don't say anything. This is really quite foolish, you know, and I am very, very sorry," she added, a little wistfully.

He drew her arm through his.

"Come," he insisted, "let us forget it. I am longing to show you my gardens. Those cedar trees are over five hundred years old. The critics, you among

them sometimes, tell me often that I am too imaginative. Tell me, if you had been brought up in their shadow, in these gardens, wouldn't you, too, open your heart to fancies?"

They had passed now through the doorway and she looked around her in mingled amazement and delight. This was really the front of the house, surrounded by a long, stone-flagged walk, bordered on the garden side by a low stone terrace. Before them were steps leading on to the lawn, and below, shelving gardens, brilliant with color, dropped to the lake; and beyond the lake, the woods. The lawn upon which they stood was as smooth as velvet, green with the eternal green of age. Beneath the cedar trees were many cushioned chairs and a glittering tea equipage; upon another table, jugs of cool drinks and bowls of fruit.

"It is wonderful," she murmured. "It is a little Paradise, this, in which you live."

For one marvelous moment she forgot. The change from her little flat in Kensington, which she had scarcely left through many months of unceasing work and anxiety, was too complete. It was indeed like fairyland to her. Then Lakenham's voice behind — a loud, strident voice — struck fear once more into her heart.

"Let's go and find your sister, Miss Mary. Just like Jermyn to make off with her like this. Come and see fair play. And, Parkes, before you do another thing mix me a large whisky and soda with a chunk of ice, please."

Sybil half closed her eyes. Her fairyland seemed to be crumbling up. Jermyn watched her with a shade of real anxiety upon his face.

"He isn't really so bad, dear," he whispered, "and we'll escape nearly all the time."

Once more she looked up at him with that self-same air, the air of the child who seeks protection.

"Escape!" she faltered. "Yes, we must escape!"

CHAPTER III

"I call this a most interesting situation," Lucille remarked, making a little poke with her parasol at an intrusive bee. "Our one dramatist of the younger school who can lay claim to any measure of inspiration — forgive me, Jermyn, but I love to quote the *Daily Mail* — is studying in these romantic surroundings the woman who is the chief interpreter of his genius. How do you like that, all of you? If you would eat bread and butter a little less vigorously, my dear Jermyn, and keep your eyes fixed upon Miss Cluley, you might help the illusion."

"Much too hungry," Jermyn replied, lifting up a silver cover and helping himself to a scone. "I had scarcely any lunch. They would put me in first wicket down."

"Make any?" Lord Lakenham inquired.

"Forty-two," Jermyn answered, holding out his cup for more tea. "Rather a sound innings, too. Mary, if you don't eat another scone, our single wicket cricket match to-morrow is off."

Mary helped herself without hesitation.

"I wonder if you can bowl googlies?" she asked. "A girl at school can."

"My dear child," Jermyn assured her impressively, "I can bowl anything. There are times after the ball has left my hands when a very demon seems to possess

it. I can make it swerve in the air like an American baseball pitcher, or do a double break all round the bat."

"Don't believe a word of it," Mary declared, derisively. "I don't believe there is such a thing as a double break."

"Pity they never tried you for the county," Lord Lakenham remarked. "I never remember seeing you bowl an over in a match in my life."

Jermyn sighed gently as he stirred his tea.

"There is so much jealousy in county cricket," he explained. "If you are played for your batting, you are expected to bat and to make runs. To bowl as well is not good form."

"Ever been put on?" Lakenham persisted.

"Never," Jermyn confessed. "That, however, is entirely due to my modesty. I have never mentioned my peculiar acquirements. Wait until you see me bowl, Mary, at the nets to-morrow! Lucille, Miss Cluley will have a little more tea."

"Miss Cluley is finding you all much too frivolous," Lucille pronounced. "She sides with me, I am sure. Jermyn ought to be lying on the grass, studying every trick of your features, every change of your expression, oughtn't he, Miss Cluley? This is his great opportunity."

"I am not sure," Sybil replied, "that a tea-party is calculated to call up any emotions worth studying."

"My dear," Lucille declared, "a tea-party is sometimes an epitome of all the passions. I have known tragedies lived and acted during the progress of this apparently harmless meal. I have seen women share a plate of muffins who I knew were thirsting for one

another's blood. In Hungary I remember two deputies who were absolutely the most polite men there, who went out and fought a most savage duel ten minutes after taking chocolate and sweetmeats with me. There is no telling what feelings may be concealed between the lightest and idlest of chatter. Don't you agree with me, Miss Cluley?"

Sybil looked up and met Lucille's gaze, half lazy, half insolent. Quick of comprehension, she was suddenly conscious of an enemy. Her heart sank but she answered coolly enough.

"Repression is rather the fashion, nowadays, isn't it? It makes acting very difficult. After all, you know, a little noise does help."

"I am afraid you won't get much out of Jermyn," Lucille said. "His methods are almost crawly, they are so quiet."

"Give me a good honest melodrama," Lakenham declared. "I like to see my hero and my villain on the stage and have them fight it out. Plenty of blood-letting, I say. It's the old-fashioned method but it's the surest and safest. *Drury Lane* for me all the time! Now why are you looking at me so intently, Miss Cluley? Of course, you think I'm talking rubbish."

Sybil withdrew her eyes with a little start.

"As a matter of fact," she replied, "I think that I was agreeing with you. Craft goes a long way round but it sometimes loses its way. Simple force speaks first and speaks, perhaps, more surely."

There was a brief pause. Sybil's words were spoken lightly enough yet Jermyn turned round to glance at her. There was a strain of earnestness in the conversation which he did not quite appreciate.

"In these days, unfortunately," Lucille said, "the subtler methods of requital are safer. To poison your dearest enemy might lead to most unpleasant reprisals, but you can at least tell everybody where she buys her hats, and the secret of her complexion."

Jermyn shivered palpably.

"You women are crueller by nature than we are," he declared. "A simple shot through the heart would satisfy us. Now," he added, rising to his feet, "I want to warn you all that I am going to be a monopolist. I am going to take Miss Cluley away by myself into the most secluded spot I can think of, and I shan't even tell you where it is. The rest of you can do exactly as you like. Lakenham, you can flirt with Lucille — she is just from Paris and in splendid practice — or you can play games with Mary. Please!"

He held out his hands to Sybil. She sprang lightly to her feet. Her eyes thanked him.

"Nice sort of host you are," Lakenham complained. "I've got to go to-morrow or the next day. When am I going to see anything of Miss Cluley?"

"My dear fellow," Jermyn replied, "I simply do not care. In this matter you are a Philistine. You are outside the gates of the garden in which Miss Cluley and I are privileged to wander. We belong, you see, to the sacred coterie. We are artists, and the work of each one of us depends upon the other. I have an invincible claim to monopolize Miss Cluley altogether."

"Miserable selfishness!" Lakenham grumbled. "You don't suppose Miss Cluley wants to be talking shop all the time?"

"A remark," Jermyn retorted, "which proves to me, my dear cousin, that you have never had the privilege

of knowing intimately any one who belongs to the Profession. It's absolutely all-engrossing, isn't it, Miss Cluley? "

"Absolutely," she admitted.

"That's why you chucked novels and took to plays, I suppose? " Lakenham asked.

"It was perhaps a mistake," Jermyn acknowledged, with a sigh. "Before, I was at least a man and a novelist. Now I have sold myself into slavery — I am a dramatist. Come along, Miss Cluley. Don't mind him, really."

Lakenham watched them cross the lawn and disappear in one of the walks. His eyes never left the girl's figure. Lucille also turned her head. She watched Sybil with the thoughtful yet grudging appraisement of a rival.

"The girl has the trick of walking as though she trod on air," she remarked. "She is really amazingly graceful."

Lakenham grunted. He was still looking at the entrance to the laurel walk down which the two figures had disappeared.

"If only I could — remember! " he exclaimed, moodily.

Lucille looked at him with dawning curiosity.

"Remember what? "

He turned around to be sure that Mary was out of hearing. She had taken some biscuits and was throwing them to the swans in the lake a little distance away.

"Something about this girl. What does Jermyn have her down here for and take the trouble to provide a chaperon? What's it mean, I wonder? Who is she? "

His companion was looking at him steadfastly. *Page 23.*

"Who is she?" Lucille repeated. "Now surely that is an unnecessary question. Everybody knows who Sybil Cluley is."

"Yes, yes!" he agreed, impatiently. "One gets tired of reading that she is the prettiest, and most charming, and sweetest, and most virtuous young actress on the stage. We know all about that. What I can't get out of my head is that I knew something of her before all these wonderful things happened."

His companion was looking at him steadfastly. Her fine eyes were fixed upon his face, her head was resting upon the slim fingers of her right hand.

"How interesting!" she murmured. "You are not going to tell me that she was one of that innumerable army of your victims?"

"I tell you I can't remember," he declared, irritably. "A thing like that always bothers me."

Lucille's fingers trifled with her parasol. From underneath it, however, she was studying her companion's discontented expression with real interest.

"It is curious that your memory should have served you such a trick," she remarked, after a moment's pause. "I wonder whether it has occurred to you that Miss Cluley might be troubled in the same manner?"

Lakenham selected a cigar from his case and bit off the end savagely.

"What do you mean?"

Lucille laughed softly.

"My dear man," she went on, "couldn't you see how she kept her back to you all the time, whenever she could? I am afraid that she must dislike you very much indeed. I am rather a keen observer of these

little things and I couldn't help noticing that she never even glanced towards you if she could help it."

"Just the same in the motor," Lakenham admitted, reluctantly. "Can't think what she means by it. She's the prettiest little thing I ever saw in my life, too!" he added, enthusiastically. "I've got past the impressionable age, you know, but that girl could make a fool of me whenever she chose."

"At present," Lucille continued, smoothly, "she seems to have no inclination in that direction. I agree with you, of course, that she is very sweet and very beautiful, but all the same —"

"What?"

Lucille smoothed her muslin gown over her knees.

"I don't want Jermyn to marry her," she said quietly.

"Is he thinking of it?"

"It is just the sort of idiotic thing," Lucille declared, "that one might expect of him. The more I think of it, the more frightened I become. Jermyn lives all the time with his head in the clouds. He is straining always to find something better than the things which actually exist. He worships beauty and he wants to believe that everything which he sees is beautiful. It is a very dangerous state. He won't condescend to look down and see the way ordinary human beings really live. If the girl has her wits about her, I am afraid it's all up with Jermyn, unless —"

"Unless what?"

"Unless you can remember!"

Lakenham grinned, amiably yet not pleasantly.

"Devilish amusing, this!" he exclaimed. "We were talking of *Drury Lane* just now. Here we are,

you and I, villain and adventuress in the latest melodrama. Can we pick a hole in the spotless heroine's past?"

"It is at any rate a melodrama of real life," Lucille declared. "You see, the whole affair is really most annoying for me. I have always intended to marry Jermyn myself."

"Quite a natural arrangement," Lakenham agreed, "if you really do intend to take up matrimony again. I am a much better match, you know."

She looked at him with a faint smile. In her way she was more beautiful than Sybil, but she was certainly not the type which appealed to Lakenham.

"I don't think you're quite my style, Aynesworth," she remarked. "You have lived too long and too rapidly. You should marry an *ingénue* — that will probably be your fate in a few years' time. Why not make a Marchioness of your long-legged friend down by the pond? She'll be as pretty as her sister, no doubt, when she grows up."

"Thank you," Lakenham grunted, "I'm not taking that sort into St. George's, Hanover Square."

"You ought to be thankful to take anything you can get," Lucille said, severely. "I don't think any nice girl who knew what she was doing, would look at you."

"If you slang me much longer," he grumbled, "I'll leave off trying to remember."

She smiled at him.

"I am not afraid of that, Aynesworth. You know, you are rather a vain man and you are a little piqued. You are just in the frame of mind to be dogged. Besides, you admire Miss Cluley yourself. Every man

does, of course. Nothing would please you more than suddenly to remember the sort of thing you would like to remember about her, and to take her into a quiet corner and remind her of it. She'd have to be nice to you then, wouldn't she?"

"I wouldn't be your husband for anything!" Lakenham declared. "You're too clever to live with in comfort. Here's the child coming back."

Lucille rose to her feet.

"I shall take her to see the peacocks," she decided. "She might be worth cultivating. You had better come, too."

Lakenham shook his head and threw himself into a comfortable chair.

"Not I," he answered. "I believe her sister's told her not to talk to me if she can help it. She avoids me all the time, and I'm sure I don't want to play around with a long-legged brat. I am going to sit here — and stir up the ashes of my sinful past. Perhaps in that way I may remember!"

CHAPTER IV

Jermyn led his companion down the narrow path which threaded the shrubberies, towards the flower gardens.

"Sometimes," he remarked, as he opened the little iron gate which led into the open spaces, "I am inclined to believe that Hazlitt was an idiot, and that your art must be, in reality, of a higher order than any other. You are face to face with a continual struggle to escape from flagrantly artificial surroundings. You have all the time to project yourself into an atmosphere of your own creation. Now down here, for instance, in my study, which looks over these gardens and across the valley, work seems almost spontaneous, the thoughts come unbidden."

Her eyes were traveling over the glowing carpet of color, across the tree tops of the park to the dim blue of the hills.

"You never told me that your home was so beautiful," she murmured.

"I wanted you to come and see it for yourself," he replied. "You see, one is never sure what the place one cares for most in the world will seem like to anybody else. I do hope that you and your sister, too, will enjoy this little holiday."

"Do you think there could be any doubt about it?" she asked him, smiling. "It was so nice of you to

invite Mary. I love to see her in the country. I want to have her grow up fond of the country and country ways."

He nodded.

"There is no place quite so dear to me as Annerley," he said. "At the same time, one has to remember that life is a leaven of many things. We mustn't be too bucolic. What should we do without the inspiration of the great cities?"

"Oh, I realize that!" she answered softly. "I know it. I feel that little thrill of excitement every time I enter London. In a lesser degree I feel it every time I enter the theatre. It's all wonderful, of course, and while it lasts it's engrossing enough. Yet there is always the reverse side and the reverse side is horrible."

"Is it my fancy," he asked, "or have you come down to-day a little depressed?"

She hesitated.

"I started all right," she assured him, "in fact, I think I felt like a child who has a wonderful holiday before it. Of the two, I think I was more excited even than Mary."

He looked down into her face, frowning slightly for a moment.

"I can't help fearing," he said, "that something has annoyed you. Forgive me, Miss Cluley — forgive me, Sybil, won't you, if I ask you a rather impertinent question? Lakenham is my cousin, of course, and, I believe, a decent fellow in a general sort of way, but I know also that he can be an unmannerly brute on occasions. He didn't annoy you, by any chance, on the way here?"

"Not in the least," she answered. "He talked to Mary most of the time."

"You don't happen to have any prejudice against him, to have met him or heard of him before — to have met him yourself, I mean?"

Sybil stooped down and picked a spray of lavender, which she arranged in the bosom of her gown.

"I have never met so exalted a personage as a marquis before in my life," she declared. "As I told you, I have heard something which has perhaps prejudiced me, but apart from that I do not like him. It is a sort of instinct, I suppose. I am afraid of him. He reminds me of a certain type of man, and that type of man recalls a short part of my life which makes me hysterical when I even think of it. That is all. It is very foolish of me. Let us for these few minutes, at any rate, sweep him away, up into the clouds or down under the earth. It isn't worth while letting the thought of him poison this perfect afternoon. I think that your gardens are the loveliest I have ever seen. And are those really peaches on the walls?"

He picked one and gave it to her. She ate it with a little murmur of delight.

"Fancy having all these things growing instead of seeing them only in the restaurants!" she exclaimed. "How Mary will enjoy this!"

"We'll have a regular tour of inspection in the morning," he promised, "but this first half-hour I wanted to spend with you alone. Come a little further still, Sybil."

He opened a green postern gate, studded with nails and set into the ancient wall, and they passed through it into a corner of the park. A little further on was

a thickly growing plantation, an arm stretched out from the belt of forest behind the house. He opened the gate and they passed inside. The rabbits scurried away at their feet, the trees overhead grew so thickly that only little streaks of sunshine lay like a gilded skein upon the brambles and undergrowth.

"Sybil," Jermyn said quietly, "can't you imagine why it makes me so happy to have you down here — why I have been looking forward to it so much?"

She looked at him for a moment, genuinely startled. One of the hardest parts of her lonely life during the last few years had been to keep men from making love to her. She flattered herself that she knew the exact symptoms, the exact type of man from whom they might be expected. She was always on her guard. And yet now she had a sudden feeling that something wonderful was going to happen, something wholly unexpected, something against which no measure of preparation nor any possible resistance could avail her. Their meetings in London, every one of which she remembered, had been almost formal. Compared with the men whom she was in the habit of meeting day by day, he had always seemed to her almost unnaturally serious, a writer devoted to his art, with a touch of the monk in his disposition. This change in his voice, a look which she had surprised in his eyes, amazed her. She felt suddenly weak. He went on.

"Sybil, I want you to be my wife. I want you, if you can, to care for me just a little at first so that I can teach you some day to care a great deal. I want to tell you here and now, if only you will listen, what you have come to mean to me, how much I love you."

"You can't be serious!" she gasped. "You don't really mean this!"

He laughed as he stooped a little towards her. All her strength was passing away. All her power of resistance, if indeed she had ever desired to resist him, seemed numb. A rapturous lassitude was upon her. The very instinct of resistance had perished. She yielded herself willingly to his arms, his lips.

"Sybil, you must care for me a little," he pleaded. "You don't know how much you have come to mean to me. You have found your way into every corner of my life, and when I sit down to write, my heroine comes back to me and smiles out of your eyes. Then I put my pen down and I fill my room with fancies which are so much more wonderful than anything one can write about. I want you so much, dear. I want to see you here alone with me, just as I have seen you in your pretty frocks, and with your quaint, fascinating little ways, drawing the tears and laughter from all those crowds in London just as easily as you have stolen my heart. Dear, before we read the play, won't you promise to be the one heroine of my life?"

"I am not good enough," she sobbed presently, hiding her face against his shoulder. "You are much too clever and you ought to marry some one quite different. But of course I love you, and of course I'll marry you, if you really mean it."

It was nearly seven o'clock before they returned. Lucille was playing languid croquet with Mary. Lakenham was lounging in a wicker chair, with his hands in his pockets and a disfiguring scowl upon his none too handsome features.

"Shall I tell them?" Jermyn whispered.

She caught at his arm.

"Not just yet, please," she begged. "I am a little afraid of the Duchess, and I am afraid —"

She stopped short. He followed her gaze — she was looking at Lord Lakenham.

"There is nothing in the world, dear," he insisted, quietly but firmly, "which should make you afraid. Remember that you have me to protect you now."

She looked up at him swiftly. That one look was quite enough for the people upon the lawn!

"It shall be just as you decide," she said, "only — not this instant, at any rate."

Lucille raised the lorgnette which hung from her waistband, and looked at them.

"My dear people," she exclaimed, "you have had time to act a play instead of reading it."

Jermyn laughed good-humoredly. His cheeks were a little flushed, his eyes very bright.

"I make no excuses," he declared. "I was perfectly honest when I announced my intention of monopolizing Miss Cluley. How's the croquet going?"

"Execrably," Lucille replied. "The child is much too good for me. That lazy person in the chair flatly refused to play, or I should never have offered myself up as a sacrifice."

"I am for the last hoop with the blue ball and black's a rover," Mary announced. "It's quite the loveliest lawn I ever played on."

Sybil crossed over to her sister. Jermyn and Lucille stood side by side.

"You really are an angel," he whispered to her. "I am afraid you must have been bored to death. Never mind, you shall have your reward. I have some

people coming to play bridge with you this evening."

"Country bridge!" she sighed. "My dear Jermyn, you do make large demands upon your friends."

"You told me only a few weeks ago," he reminded her, "that auction bridge was your only real diversion."

"Not the sort of auction bridge, my dear Jermyn, that your neighbors here know anything about, I am afraid," she replied. "Never mind, I trust I know my duty as a hostess, although I don't think I quite understood. . . . I have to do something with this ball — I am not sure what. Please stand out of the way."

They all trooped into the house a few minutes later. Lakenham lingered behind with Mary.

"You play that game jolly well," he told her.

"I love all games," the child confided to him,— "cricket best, though."

"Did you live in the country when you were young?" he asked.

"Not that I remember," Mary confessed. "I learned to play cricket at school."

"Can't you remember anywhere at all before London?" he persisted.

She shook her head.

"I don't think I can remember as far back as some people," she said. "It isn't much fun trying, anyway. Are you going to play cricket to-morrow, Lord Lakenham?"

"I am not sure," he answered. "I am moving on to-morrow or the next day. Don't you want some lemonade?"

They all gathered round a small table in the middle of the hall, where a great bowl of iced claret cup and another of lemonade had just been brought. Jermyn

filled the glasses himself with a silver ladle. Then he took Sybil's hand.

"Lucille," he said, "and you, Aynesworth, and you too, Mary," he added, drawing her to him, "please all of you drink our healths. Sybil has promised to marry me."

The child gave a little scream of delight which, in its way, was merciful. Lucille stood for a moment white and still. Lakenham smiled — not at all a pleasant smile.

"Quite an interesting announcement," he declared, lifting his glass to his lips. "My dear Jermyn, I congratulate you. When this is known, you will be the most envied man in England. I wish you every happiness, too, Miss Cluley. Jermyn's a good fellow and he's been a pretty hard nut to crack from a matrimonial point of view. Sure I wish you every happiness."

"Did you bring me here, Jermyn," Lucille asked him quietly, "on purpose to give me this delightful surprise? If so, it was indeed good of you!"

Jermyn shook his head.

"When I asked you, Lucille," he replied, "I had neither made up my mind myself nor had I the least idea that Sybil would accept me."

Lucille looked at him steadily for a moment. Then she turned away with a little shrug of the shoulders.

"I wish you both — what can I say? — all the happiness that you deserve," she declared. "There is nothing more than that, is there?"

"There is nothing more," Jermyn agreed.

"Will Sybil really live here?" Mary inquired, in an awed tone.

"Whenever she chooses," Jermyn replied. "This will be her home, at any rate, and yours too, Mary, but we shall have to have a little corner of our own in town somewhere. If I took your sister away from her work all at once, I should probably find myself the most unpopular man in London."

"The new play, then," Lakenham asked, lighting a cigarette and moving towards the staircase, "will not be postponed?"

"Certainly not," Jermyn assured him. "Sybil and I are going to begin studying it to-night."

The two sisters went up the stairs with their arms around one another. Jermyn was left alone for a moment with Lucille. Even he, with his mind full of his new-found happiness, could scarcely help noticing the change which the last few minutes seemed to have wrought in his companion.

"You are tired, Lucille," he said, compassionately. "I ought not to have left you alone with the child for so long."

"It is nothing," she answered. "Your news was just a little surprising, wasn't it? Tell me, Jermyn, have you had this in your mind for long?"

"In a way, I have," he admitted, "and in a way, to tell you the honest truth, I have been fighting against it. I write plays and I enjoy writing them, but, between ourselves, I hate the English stage and everything connected with it. I detest the atmosphere of the green room, I dislike intensely a great many of the people with whom Sybil has to associate. I always admired her, and yet, for the reasons I have mentioned, I made up my mind that I would try and conquer it. You see, I have failed. Sybil is an honest, sweet,

faithful girl, and I should be a fool to hesitate because I dislike her surroundings. All the more credit to her for the way she has lived."

Lucille raised her magnificent eyes to his.

"Is there any doubt whatever, Jermyn," she asked, "as to the way she has lived?"

There was silence for a moment. Jermyn winced as though he had been struck. He drew himself up a little. He seemed suddenly taller and graver.

"My dear Lucille," he said, "that question from a stranger would have led to serious consequences. From you I must treat it as simply the first error in good taste of which I ever remember you to have been guilty."

She walked away very slowly, without any further word. She ascended the great stairs, passing with her head erect between the long lines of those ancestors of his and hers. She had never realized, perhaps, until that moment how confidently she had planned some day or other to find her resting place in this house as its mistress. She had looked upon Jermyn as her certain possession. He had, if anything, disliked women. She alone had known how to soothe his fancies, to talk with him on his favorite subjects, to bring even the admiration sometimes into his eyes. She had trifled with the thing until it was too late. Her nails dug into the palms of her hand as she passed along the corridor, her head thrown back, her cheeks bloodless. There was, indeed, but one chance. If only Aynesworth could remember!

CHAPTER V

"This," Sybil said softly to herself, as she descended to the drawing-room, "should be one of the happiest evenings in my life. It shall be!"

Even Lucille, gowned by Paquin and with a European reputation for smartness, could find no fault with her guest as she entered the room. Sybil wore a dinner-gown of blue net, which a famous dressmaker had designed for her, and a large bunch of white sweet-peas which Jermyn had sent to her room. Her face was suddenly freed from the little cloud which had sometimes hovered there during the afternoon. It was as though her great happiness had triumphed over every anxiety, had finally crushed the presentiment which had distressed her. She moved joyfully, her cheeks were pink; her eyes, soft and glowing with excitement, seemed actually to have increased in size. There was a touch almost of shyness as she took Jermyn's arm. Somehow or other, the news seemed to have spread, and the old butler and the other servants whom they passed on their way to the dining-room, bowed with a new deference.

"Never since this house was built, dear," Jermyn told her softly, "has it had so lovely a mistress. You know that we shall have to spend a great deal of time here?"

"I am not sure," she answered, "that you will ever

be able to get me away. You will have to write like the immortals to inspire me with ambition."

"Do you know that you are bewitching to-night?" he murmured. "This afternoon you looked a little tired, almost worried. There was a frown somewhere upon your forehead, and a dear little line at the corner of your eyes. You looked at poor Lakenham as though he were some sort of an ogre. Now your face is like an April sky after the last drops of rain have fallen."

"It is because my heart is like that," she whispered. "I do not feel that there is an ugly or an unkind person upon the face of the earth."

Sybil let herself go from that moment. She was gay, she was charming, she was joyous. Even Lucille, watching her always from her place at the end of the table, admitted to herself that this little girl from the theatres was no unworthy rival. Lord Lakenham, to whom she talked with a new spirit, and whom she even rallied gently upon his moroseness during the early stages of dinner, seemed to change by degrees his whole attitude towards her. From the suspicious resentment of a man whose attentions have been slighted, he developed an admiration which he took no pains to conceal. He vied with Jermyn in gallant speeches; his eyes followed her all the time. He drank glass after glass of champagne, and his manner became more and more unrestrained. Jermyn grew a little reserved toward the end of the meal. He was glad enough to see the slight antagonism between Sybil and his cousin removed, but he certainly did not approve of Lakenham's present attitude.

"Jermyn, old fellow, I'm not sure that you deserve

your luck," Lakenham declared, setting down his empty glass. "You're a dull stick sometimes, you know. No one would think, to watch you now, that the prettiest woman in England had just promised to marry you. If I thought you meant to shut Miss Cluley up here for the rest of her life, I'd forbid the banns."

"We haven't an idea of anything of the sort," Jermyn assured him. "On the contrary, Miss Cluley and I are going to begin studying the new play directly after dinner. You will in all probability see it produced in October."

"And dull stuff I expect it will be," Lakenham grumbled. "I used to like Miss Cluley before you got hold of her for your psychological plays. They're much too clever for me, all of them. You ought to have stayed in musical comedy, Miss Cluley."

"Do you think so?" she laughed. "You know, I spent all my time when I was in it praying for the day when managers would think that I was worth something better."

Lakenham shook his head vigorously.

"All depends upon what you would call something better, of course. For my part, give me a rattling good musical comedy, with a jolly good waltz tune, lots of pretty girls in slap-up frocks, and a principal like you. There's nothing better that I know of."

"Oh, but there is, really!" Sybil protested. "That may be all very pretty and graceful but it isn't the real thing."

"And what," Lucille asked calmly, "is the real thing?"

"Not to amuse people," Sybil replied, "but to make them feel. Laughter, mirth-compelling stories and

musical comedies, only minister to the holiday moments of life. To portray real emotions, to excite real sympathies, to make people think, to send them away feeling that they have passed through a little epitome of life, to break through the crust and make them conscious for a few moments of the great things — that seems to me so much more wonderful."

Jermyn laid his hands upon hers, his eyes glowed with pleasure.

"That," he declared, "is what we are going to do."

Lakenham laughed long and boisterously.

"If all the pretty actresses in London were to fill their heads with those ideas," he exclaimed, "half the theatres would have to close their doors before the season was over, and the other half wouldn't pay! It won't do, Miss Cluley. The stage in London, at any rate, wasn't meant for that sort of thing. Amusement is what we all want, nowadays. We don't want to have our feelings trifled with after dinner. You were the most divine Elsa who ever waltzed upon the stage. You'll never do anything greater than that."

She made a little grimace at him.

"For you, perhaps, no, Lord Lakenham, but then, you see, there are many people in the world who have other standards."

"Thank heaven!" Jermyn whispered under his breath. . . . "And now," he added, rising, "you have all been warned. There are some people in the drawing-room who want bridge — a couple of men from the barracks who couldn't get over in time to dine, and the local doctor, who, they tell me, is quite first-class. Miss Cluley and I are going to read and we mustn't be disturbed upon any pretext."

Lucille rose slowly to her feet. She paused for a moment as she passed her host.

"Jermyn," she said quietly, "I do not consider it good taste on your part to go to your study and shut yourself up with Miss Cluley."

"My dear Lucille," he protested, "don't you understand? Miss Cluley came down here simply that we might study my new play together. She has not seen her part yet and it is to be produced within three months. There is really not an hour to lose."

Lucille shrugged her shoulders very slightly and passed on her way out of the room. Jermyn watched her disappear with a puzzled frown upon his forehead.

"I am not sure," he said to Sybil, as they crossed the hall together, "that I quite understand Lucille."

"Then you are a goose!" she laughed.

Jermyn's study was the old library of the house, only a trifle modernized. The book-cases, which reached to the ceiling, were mellow with age, but the interior of the room, though still preserving a certain scholarly tone, gave evidences of a more modern taste. A baby grand piano stood in one corner. There were guns and fishing rods and cricket bats in evidence. The windows opened on to the lawn and beyond were the woods, behind which the moon, slowly rising, was already visible. Jermyn dragged the writing-table up to the open windows and lit a green-shaded lamp. Then he placed Sybil by his side in a low chair and took up the play. Suddenly she held out her white arms to him.

"Jermyn," she whispered, "never mind about the play for a moment. Tell me, please, tell me now, quickly, that it isn't all a dream? It's so wonderful

that I feel as though I were drawn up into Heaven, and then sometimes I am afraid!"

Her eyes were large and round and pleading, her voice trembled, her lips were quivering. Her whole frame seemed shaken with suppressed feeling. He dropped on one knee by her side.

"Dearest, it is all quite true," he assured her eagerly. "You know that it is all true. I love you very dearly and you have promised to be my wife."

She gripped hold of him. There was a nervous strength in her fingers which held his arms.

"I am so afraid," she murmured, "that something may happen, that it may all go. Are you sure that you don't think — you're not imagining that I'm better, that I'm cleverer than I am? Tell me that it is I myself, just as I am — just as I am here at this moment — not different in any way — whom you love? Tell me that, Jermyn? Make me sure of it — make me believe it!"

He held her in his arms. Her heart was beating fast against his as he kissed her.

"Dear," he answered, "it is indeed you, you just as you are now, no cleverer, no different, just you whom I love. Nothing shall come between us. There is nothing in the world which you need fear."

She gave a deep sigh of content. Nevertheless, she would not let him go.

"Stay where you are and I will tell you what it is that troubles me," she went on. "I am a little afraid of you. No, don't interrupt. You see, all of the men whom I met at the theatres, the actors and the manager's friends, and the men whom one meets out — I don't go often, you know, but sometimes I have to go

to the other girls' houses — they are all so different. They look as though they belonged entirely and altogether to the world. They are like Lord Lakenham. And you are different. You are very different, aren't you, Jermyn? Your face is so grave and quiet sometimes, and you look as though the ordinary things of life didn't amuse or interest you. You look all the time as though you were seeking for something better, something better always. All the time your head is lifted towards the clouds. You seem to be listening for the music that comes from Heaven. And I am on the earth, Jermyn — I am so very much upon the earth! I can't get my feet away from it. I am afraid that I may not see what you see!"

"You silly child," he answered, consolingly. "If I am just a little different from the others, well, it isn't anything in the least to be afraid of. It simply hasn't amused me to lead the ordinary London life. I have loved my books; I have loved to study a little. I am fond of the country and country sports — so will you be in time. But don't believe for a moment, please, that I am a prig. I think I really do know the value of things. I want to come nearer to you, just as much as I want to draw you a little nearer to me. It's humanity I want to study, dear, and you'll help me, I know. If I was a little quiet at dinner-time, well, you must forgive me. Lakenham was making rather an ass of himself, wasn't he?"

She held him once more tightly in her arms.

"I never dreamed that this would come to me," she said softly, "but now that it has come I couldn't bear to lose you. It's been so hard, the last few years, Jermyn. I've tried almost to shut myself up lately,

but there have always been men whom one meets somehow or other, and they have come, and before I have talked to them for an afternoon or an evening they begin the same old foolish, insincere, artificial love-making, just because I am Sybil Cluley, I suppose, a little girl on the comedy stage. I've wanted friends so often and the women are very scarce who would know me and whom I would care to know, and even the nice men, whom I would like to have been friendly with, always began to try to pay me compliments and imagine things, instead of treating me like a reasonable human being. I was getting tired of it all, tired to death, Jermyn, and I was so lonely. And then you came, and now everything is wonderful. I don't feel, somehow, that I have any right to be as happy as I am, and yet I don't feel that I could bear it if it didn't last."

He smiled at her confidently.

"Do I feel like a dream, dear?" he asked. "Do you think that I could fade away? I am a very solid, human man, and I love you far too much to give you up — ever."

She drew a long sigh of content.

"If you are sure," she said; "if you are quite, quite sure — well, then, we will begin the play."

CHAPTER VI

The last page of the manuscript was turned. The moon now was clear of the tree tops, yellow and luminous in the midsummer sky. A little breeze was rustling among the firs, a breeze which brought through the open French-windows occasional wafts of spicy perfume from the flower-gardens. Sybil's eyes were glowing, but she was very quiet.

"It is wonderful," she whispered. "It is really wonderful, Jermyn. And yet, I am so sorry."

"Sorry?"

She wiped the tears from her eyes.

"I am sorry for the woman — for 'Nora'— for the woman who will be myself."

"She deceived her husband," he said, a little sternly. "She lied to her friend."

"But there was a reason," she reminded him eagerly. "She didn't do it for her own sake. Every evil thing she did was to save another from suffering."

"She broke her word," Jermyn remarked calmly. "There isn't any excuse in this world for a woman who deliberately breaks her word."

"No excuse!" she repeated, her eyes still holding his.

"None! Can't you see that what she did in that first act was like a black spot upon her life? She was never the same afterwards. She lost her self-respect.

The lie that followed seemed almost natural to her. The moment she let go of the absolute truth she began to sink."

"But she was tempted — she was horribly tempted, and women are so weak when they are lonely," Sybil reminded him, tearfully.

He smiled at her.

"Dear," he said, "of course she was tempted. If there was no temptation, how could there be any sin? A man is judged not by the number of his sins but by the number of temptations which he has overcome. Sinlessness in a person who has encountered absolutely no temptation is scarcely even a quality; it is a necessary condition of existence. Now tell me really what you think of your part?"

"If I can ever play it," she replied, "it will be my best."

"You really mean that?"

"I do," she insisted. "I honestly do. And yet, because I am so sure of it I am a little afraid. I believe that I could play the part of 'Nora' so that I could bring tears to the eyes of every woman who understands, and of every man who loves the woman who understands. Oh, I know what 'Nora' was. But then she was human, so human that I am afraid. She is like me — just like me."

Jermyn laughed reassuringly.

"And why shouldn't you be human, dear," he answered, stooping towards her, "adorably, wonderfully human? And I wouldn't have you anything else. Bring your little faults with you, dear, and I'll love them. Now let's put the play away for a time. It's all rather emotional, isn't it, and I don't want you to be

overstrung. I wonder if you know what you are really like, little lady? Look here."

He drew an illustrated paper towards him and turned over the pages.

"It only arrived this evening," he said, "so I don't suppose you have seen it. The photograph you know, of course, but did you ever see such a lovely reproduction? I think that I shall frame it just as it is. It is softer and more beautiful even than the photograph itself."

He showed her the full-length picture of herself. She looked at it approvingly.

"Am I really as nice as that?" she murmured.

"Nicer by far," he assured her, smiling. "There are qualities in your face, dear, which no photographer could ever know anything about. And do you see what a wonderful person you are? Two pages — biography or interview or something. Nobody ever wanted to interview me at that length."

She leaned over his shoulder.

"You stupid person!" she declared. "As though you could possibly compare us!"

"I am not jealous," he laughed, "but there's no illustrated paper could find as much to say about me. Here you are. Born — gracious, you're twenty-three years old! — no, twenty-four! Stock companies for so long, musical comedies so long, your first great success a fluke. You were playing — why, what's the matter, Sybil? What is it, dear?"

He broke off suddenly and looked at her in amazement. A hoarse little cry had broken from her lips; the color was fading from her cheeks. She was gazing intently at the page from which he had been idly quoting.

"It's there!" she cried. "There!"

Jermyn looked from the paper to her, and back again.

"What's there?" he asked. "Sybil, I don't understand."

She opened her lips and closed them again. Her eyes were still distended, the fingers of one hand were clutching his shoulder. She was reading a certain paragraph. He followed her eyes. There was nothing to be read except the ordinary story, a few simple facts of her earlier career. She had been playing in stock companies at Blackpool when she was compelled to give up her position and go to London to take her sister to a hospital. While she was waiting for an operation to take place, a small part was offered to her at the last moment in a London production. She was the success of the play. From that moment she had never looked back.

"What on earth is wrong with it, dear?" he persisted. "I can't see anything, not a line, that you should not be proud of."

She was beginning to recover herself. Her cheeks, though, were still ivory white. Even her lips were almost bloodless.

"There — isn't anything," she faltered. "Forgive me, I am just a little hysterical. Seeing it all down there made me think of my struggles, of those early days! It was hard work, Jermyn."

"My dear!" he said, consolingly. "You mustn't! Those days are all over and done with now. If you think of them at all, you should think of them with pride. You should be as proud of yourself as I am of you to think that you fought your way through everything, alone and unhelped."

"Is there another of those papers in the house?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Not that I know of."

She deliberately tore a page out and thrust it into the bosom of her gown.

"I don't want people to read this and make fun of me," she said. "Keep the rest of it here. Don't let any one see it."

"No one will come in here, dear," he promised. "Of course, I think you're a foolish little girl. I should be very proud of that biography, if I were you. Now don't let's think any more of it, though. We'd better go across into the drawing-room and say good-night. I think I shall pack you off to bed. Do you know that it's nearly eleven o'clock?"

She rose to her feet. All the life and spirits of a few hours ago seemed to have gone. Once more the little wrinkle was there by her eyes. She seemed all the time to be thinking.

"Jermyn," she asked, "how long is Lord Lakenham going to stay here?"

"He is off to-morrow or the next day, I think," Jermyn replied, "unless you have turned his head completely. You seem to have got over your dislike of him," he added, smiling. "A very little more and I should have been jealous."

She shuddered.

"Jealous of Lord Lakenham! No, I don't think so, Jermyn! Will you promise me something?"

"To-night, dear," he answered, "I will promise you anything."

"If he wants to stay, don't let him. If you can get rid of him to-morrow, let him go."

"You foolish child!" Jermyn laughed. "I can't turn him out at a moment's notice if he wants to stay. There isn't any plausible reason for it. But if you make a point of it, I'll insist upon his clearing out the day afterwards. I don't think you need have any fear, though. There can't be anything for him to do here and he always needs a good deal of amusement."

She looked behind at the illustrated paper lying upon the table.

"You don't think that any one will come in here, Jermyn?" she whispered.

"No one, dear," he answered. "Now before we go out I want you to give me one kiss, and then I am going to ask you just one question."

She held up her lips.

"The question first?" she begged.

He held her tightly.

"There are never going to be any secrets between us," he said softly; "never any secrets or the shadow of a secret. Why don't you want Lord Lakenham to see that paper?"

CHAPTER VII

Jermyn entered the smoking-room about half an hour later, and found Lakenham installed in one easy-chair with his feet upon another, a large brandy-and-soda by his side, and a pipe of bulldog pattern in his mouth, from which he was emitting columns of smoke with an air of great satisfaction.

"I say, Jermyn, is Miss Cluley better?" he asked anxiously.

Jermyn nodded. He brought himself a whisky-and-soda from the sideboard and drew up an easy-chair towards his guest.

"Yes, she seems all right now," he announced. "It was just an ordinary fainting fit. I suppose she came down here really rather strung up. That acting night after night must be a strain upon any one."

"Can't see how they do it," Lakenham confessed. "Must be working on their nerves all the time. Queer thing when you come to think of it, though, to go off in a faint like that without a moment's notice."

Jermyn was looking grave and worried.

"It frightened me," he admitted. "However, she seems quite all right now. I suppose it has been rather an exciting day for her, and just as we were leaving the study I asked her a question which seemed to upset her a little. I ought to have left that sort of thing alone — for to-day, at any rate."

Lakenham looked thoughtfully at his pipe.

"Yes, I dare say she's found it a bit exciting," he remarked. "No doubt she gets plenty of offers of marriage, but we can guess the kind of people they come from as a rule — stage-struck boys, actors, and hangers-on at the theatre — any one who comes within the glamour; not to speak of the adventurers, who've got an eye on her salary. I was a bit of a fool that way myself in my younger days, but my tendencies weren't matrimonial, fortunately. It's certainly a great day for Miss Cluley."

Jermyn turned his head slightly and regarded his guest with level eyebrows.

"I consider it also," he said slowly, "a great day for me. I have the utmost respect and admiration for Miss Cluley, apart from the feelings which have prompted me to ask her to become my wife."

Lakenham knocked the ashes from his pipe slowly.

"You're a bit high-flown in your notions for me, Jermyn," he declared. "I've no doubt you know a good deal more about the young lady than I do, but if I were to become engaged to a young lady from the theatres who has had as much admiration as Miss Cluley, I shouldn't start by expecting too much. What I do say," he went on, his eyes becoming a shade brighter, "is that she's the most fascinating little creature I ever saw in all my days. Just the sort of girl to turn a man inside out. To-night at dinner-time she was irresistible, simply irresistible."

He seemed to have forgotten that his pipe was already empty. He went on tapping it against the ash-tray by his side, with his eyes fixed upon the carpet.

"I have knocked about a bit in Paris and Vienna, and

I know New York," he continued, talking as though half to himself, "but I never in the course of all my days saw a more charming, a more fascinating little object than she was to-night, with her quaint little graces and that smile and her exquisite figure. She has all the Eve tricks, you know, Jermyn."

Jermyn stiffened perceptibly.

"I find Miss Cluley exceedingly natural," he said. "That, to my mind, is one of her chief charms. By the bye, Aynesworth, you are about so much in London and you make such a point of being a figure in theatrical society, that I rather wonder you never met her."

"I rather wonder at it myself," Lakenham assented. "If I had only known — but there, it's too late now. You see, she was never to be met with at the musical comedy dances or that sort of shows. I think she knows her value, that young lady."

"Lucille was talking to me for a moment," Jermyn continued, "after we had taken Miss Cluley upstairs. She seemed to think that you were puzzled about her, that you had a sort of idea that you had met her somewhere before."

Lakenham was silent for a time.

"Between ourselves, Jermyn," he admitted, "it's a funny thing, but the idea haunts me. You know, I have knocked about a lot," he went on, confidentially. "The number of girls I've flirted with would make up one of the bulkiest albums that was ever bound. Nature didn't bless me with brains like you, Jermyn. Women and sport have been my hobbies. Yes, I can see that little curl of your lips, but I am honest, at any rate. It may seem to you an ignoble sort of confession but it's the truth. Now somewhere back in my

memory there's a little cell that I can't see into, and in that cell there's a memory, and the memory has something to do with that — that fascinating little witch upstairs. All day long I've been struggling with it, struggling to remember. The thing's becoming almost a torture to me. And this is the funny part of it, Jermyn, since we are on the subject. She won't admit it, she probably wouldn't admit it even if you asked her, but she knows."

Jermyn walked across the room for a moment and stood at the open window. The moon now was almost overhead. Against the black fir trees, the deep blue of the sky and the brilliancy of the stars seemed extraordinarily vivid. It was a still, soft night, absolutely silent save for the buzzing of a huge insect attracted by the lights. As he stood there, Jermyn was conscious of his first moment of actual depression. Was he really, as all these people were so ready to hint, an idealist, a dreamer led by his love of beauty to keep his head willfully upraised, the victim of his own sensitiveness to such an extent that he refused even to see flaws in the things which he worshiped? After all, it was a very ordinary world in which he lived. Was it incumbent upon him to accept its standards? Then a moment later he was ashamed of himself. From his first meeting with Sybil there had never been a single second when he had doubted her. He had been in those days absolutely without prejudice or preference. His intuition had started him fairly, surely his instinct was to be trusted for the rest! He thought of her simple life, her careful avoidance of all the excesses and vulgarities into which she was so continually tempted; her care for her sister, their devotion for one another.

When he came back into the room he was himself again. He was ashamed of that one moment of vacillation. He knew that this man who was responsible for it was himself the incarnation of the other things.

"Aynesworth," he said, "with reference to that memory which you say is eluding you, I should like you to understand something. You are a man of the world; I am not. I have asked Sybil Cluley to be my wife, and having done that I have placed everything I have to offer of myself and my life and my honor, in her hands. These things are not affected by circumstances. Do you follow me?"

"No, I'm hanged if I do!" Lakenham replied, striking a match and lighting his second pipe. "You've asked her to marry you all right, but if you were to find out that she was —"

He shrank suddenly back in his place. The words which he had been about to use carelessly enough seemed choked in his throat. The fire in Jermyn's eyes was like the flash of a rapier.

"Forgive me," Jermyn interrupted, quietly. "You had better let me finish. You say yourself that I am a crank. Perhaps in worldly things I am to some extent. Yet I would like you to understand this. I have made up my mind to live my life according to my own ideas, and not according to the accepted ideas of the world. For that reason I began my little speech to you. For that reason it will be better for me to conclude it before you say anything which might make it impossible for me to receive you any longer under my roof. If anything should come to you so that that cell in your memory was no longer obscured, I want you to understand this. I decline to hear anything which you

may remember concerning Miss Cluley. I decline to hear anything whatever about her except from her own lips, and from her own lips I have heard all that I choose to know. Is that clear?"

Lakenham, whose pipe was now going to his satisfaction, nodded with a subdued air of compassion.

"Yes, that's all right, Jermyn," he declared. "Lord love you, we're all made differently, aren't we? The only trouble is that I seem to be made to fit into this world, but the Lord knows where you'd find one to suit your notions!"

Jermyn smiled as he rose to his feet and threw away the end of his cigarette.

"My dear fellow," he said, "half the people you pass by in the world are living somewhere in a little garden, or a wilderness, perhaps, of their own making. We can see no more than they care to show us of their lives. We may think that they are pressing on side by side with you or with me. They aren't really. We needn't, you know, unless we like. Good night! I'll leave you to finish your pipe."

"Good night, old fellow," Lakenham answered, with a sigh. "God bless my soul!" he added to himself, as the door closed.

Jermyn found Lucille with her foot upon the stairs, looking doubtfully at the clock.

"Of course, these hours of yours, my dear host," she protested, "are too awful!"

"What on earth are you grumbling at?" Jermyn replied, smiling. "It's midnight and you've had four rubbers of bridge."

He had paused by her side. She moved a little nearer to him, as though by accident. Her eyes and

lips were very close to his. In his present state he was, of course, almost hopeless, but she was a past mistress in the small subtleties of her sex and she had great faith in propinquity. She knew, also, that she was beautiful.

"You dear, primitive person," she whispered. "I hate to go to bed before three or four o'clock, and the bridge was too awful. Your doctor was the only man who could play a card, and he didn't know auction. Really, I think I am the most self-denying person in the world to do this for you — for many reasons."

Jermyn was a trifle uncomfortable without knowing why.

"It was very nice of you to come, Lucille," he said. "Still, you proposed it yourself, didn't you, and somehow or other I always seem to rely upon you if I want any one to do me a kindness."

She looked at him with a little petulant frown.

"My dear boy," she exclaimed, "you do ask such strange kindnesses. Now something elderly, with a cat and a dead husband and cameo ornaments, would have done just as well as I."

"But I don't know anything of that sort," he objected. "Besides, you wanted to come for a few days."

"I wanted to come, it is true," she admitted, "but not exactly under these conditions. Harrod's or Whiteley's would have supplied exactly what you wanted. Really, I feel that I am wasted, besides being quite unnecessary, I am sure. Your beautiful Miss Cluley is the soul of propriety, isn't she, and you always say that your life is directed without any regard to other people's opinions."

"There are certain conventions," he replied, "which one owes it to one's future wife to observe."

She yawned.

"Every now and then, Jermyn," she declared, "you make me wonder why you are not a worse prig than you are. In any case it's too late for a discussion of this sort. If you were really grateful, really conscious of your responsibilities as my host, you would do your best to entertain me for an hour — sit with me in the garden, perhaps, and tell me about your new play. . . . No? Well, then, I shall go in and make poor Aynesworth entertain me for a few minutes. I can't think of a more satisfactory way of getting sleepy than to listen to him talk."

"You'll find him in the smoking-room in a typical attitude," Jermyn remarked, smiling. "Good night, Lucille!"

He raised her hand to his lips — their old form of salute. The fingers were very cold and she leaned just a little towards him.

"There was a time —" she whispered.

He laughed.

"Don't flirt with me, please, Lucille," he begged, moving up the stairs. "I am in far too susceptible a frame of mind."

She stood with one foot upon the bottom stair, her hand upon the banisters, watching him ascend. He passed out of sight without turning his head. Then very slowly she crossed the hall once more and entered the smoking-room.

CHAPTER VIII

Lakenham had discovered a copy of the *Sporting Times*, which he threw down at once, however, at Lucille's entrance.

"Good girl!" he exclaimed. "Come and restore my drooping spirits. I am feeling like a naughty boy left here all alone. Dear Jermyn doesn't approve of me. He's given me a little moral lecture and gone off to bed."

"I met him on the stairs," Lucille remarked. "He treated me in very much the same fashion."

"Fellow won't listen to reason," Lakenham grumbled. "I did no more than remind him that this fascinating little mortal whom he's fallen in love with belongs to the world of easier ways than his. He went and looked at the stars for about five minutes and came back like an archbishop."

"The trouble of it is," Lucille declared, taking the chair which Jermyn had vacated and helping herself to a cigarette from the gold case which hung from her chatelaine; "the trouble of it is that Jermyn *au fond* is the most pig-headed individual that ever breathed. He is up in the clouds now. Heavens, how he irritates me!"

She seldom studied appearances before Lakenham. Her face seemed to have grown harder and colder. She was smoking quickly, frowning all the time.

"Can't think how it is that the fellow attracts you at all," he said thoughtfully.

"Neither can I, and yet he does," she replied. "No wonder you see it. Every one can see it except Jermyn himself. Here have I come all the way from Dinard to try and get a few days alone with him down here, and I find myself compelled to sit at the head of his table and play propriety for his little actress. Why, in Heaven's name, doesn't he behave like an ordinary mortal and keep her where she belongs! Upon my word, if only I had the heart to laugh, it's the most absurd situation that any one could possibly devise!"

"No doing anything with Jermyn," Lakenham said, decidedly. "He's got it in the neck. Fairly bowled over. You wouldn't believe the rot he talked to me just now, after he'd been out moon-gazing. I don't know what it all meant except that he'd marry the girl even if she turned out one of the worst."

"He thinks he would," Lucille remarked, "but he wouldn't really, you know. The trouble of it is that the girl herself has been so clever. Apart from that elusive memory of yours, which I am beginning to hate, I suppose you never heard anything at the club or anywhere about her?"

"Not a single word," Lakenham declared.

"And the memory?"

"Blank as ever," he answered gloomily.

Lucille knocked the ash from her cigarette.

"Aynesworth," she said, turning a little towards him, "I am used to having my own way in life. I want to upset this marriage."

"So do I," he replied, bluntly.

She raised her eyebrows.

"You? But why? Where do you come in?"

He smoked in stolid silence for several moments. Again that rather curious light shone in his dull eyes.

"Never mind," he muttered shortly. "It isn't necessary to tell you. I want to upset it. I would if I could."

She leaned back in her chair and laughed softly.

"After all," she murmured, "I am glad I came. The situation is improving. I am no longer in the limelight as the central fool. Oh, my dear Aynesworth, Heaven bless you for this!"

He looked at her suspiciously.

"Don't understand what you're getting at," he declared.

"You wouldn't," she answered, wiping her eyes. "I'll ask you no questions. If I guess, that must be proof of my wonderful woman's sagacity. Now about that little illusion of yours. There is something which it is just possible might help."

"What is it?" he asked eagerly.

"You know that an hour or so ago Sybil Cluley fainted at the door of Jermyn's study as they were coming away?"

"Yes, I know that," he admitted. "I never saw a fellow so scared in my life as poor old Jermyn was."

"Girls don't faint for nothing, as a rule," Lucille continued. "While you two were safe in here, I have been spending a few minutes in the study."

"Find anything?"

"There was an illustrated paper face downwards upon the writing-table," Lucille told him. "It was open at a photograph of Sybil Cluley, but part of the next page, which contained an interview and an account

of her life, was torn out. It had evidently been willfully destroyed."

Lord Lakenham sat quite still, blinking quickly.

"Well?"

"It occurred to me," Lucille went on softly, "that in that interview you might find something which would give you an idea, which would perhaps help that little memory of yours to life. It seems all the more probable, doesn't it, when you consider that some one — Sybil Cluley herself, of course — during the time that they were in the study together, had deliberately torn out that page."

"By Jove!" Lakenham said slowly, sitting up in his chair. "Are there any more illustrated papers in the house?"

"There is another copy of the same one in the drawing-room," she answered. "I was on my way to get it when I met Jermyn on the stairs. Ring the bell."

Lakenham sprang up with unusual alacrity and did as he was bidden.

"Bring me some seltzer if you have any," he ordered the servant.

"And will you bring me the *Tatler* from the drawing-room," Lucille added, "and any other illustrated papers you can find?"

"Very good, madame," the man replied.

Lakenham remained standing. The hand which held his pipe shook a little. Lucille was watching him curiously.

"I don't suppose there's anything in it," he said, half to himself. "She wouldn't let them put anything in the papers that she wanted kept dark. Still, it's

an idea. . . . Why the dickens doesn't the fellow come back!"

Lucille laughed at him from the depths of her chair. Her eyes were fixed upon his face. She saw the slight twitching at the corners of his mouth, the movement of his hands.

"Really," she murmured, "this new development almost reconciles me to my share in the comedy!"

The man returned presently, bearing three illustrated papers upon a salver. As soon as he had left the room they carried them to a side table. Lakenham turned over the pages of the first with clumsy fingers. They reached the picture of Sybil. He looked at it for a moment with a curiously intent expression. Then he turned the page greedily over. Lucille gave a little cry.

"The page is missing!" she exclaimed. "It has been cut out!"

"It's gone, right enough," he echoed, hoarsely.

"It's the same page that was missing from the *Tatler*, the one I left in the study!" she cried. "I was right, then. Look at the others quickly."

Lakenham spread them out upon the table. His thick fingers were trembling. The result was as they had expected. In each case the interview was missing. Lucille smiled triumphantly. Her eyes were suddenly ablaze.

"After all," she murmured, "I think, my dear Aynesworth, that we shall be able to call that little memory of yours to life!"

CHAPTER IX

Six thoroughly exhausted people lay stretched upon the lawn in various more or less picturesque attitudes. Mary, with two boys at her feet, was fanning herself with a large panama hat and holding a little court of her own.

"I say, Miss Mary," one of the boys declared, "those are stunning leg breaks of yours — best I ever stood up to from a girl. Where did you learn to bowl them?"

"At school, I suppose, but they came quite naturally to me," Mary answered, modestly. "But what's the good? I can't get him out."

She moved her head towards the spot where Jermyn was lying at his ease by Sybil's side. The boy who had spoken first laughed.

"Why, Sir Jermyn's a county cricketer!" he exclaimed in an awed tone. "He made a hundred against Kent only the week before last. Get him out, indeed! Why, Fielder and Carr and all of them were trying as hard as they could for two hours and a quarter, and he simply did what he liked with them."

"Which reminds me," Jermyn remarked, lifting his head a few inches, "when am I going to get the rest of my innings?"

"Whenever," Mary replied, deliberately, "you are ready to bat with one hand and left-handed. Unless

you do that I shall not bowl at you again. It puts me off worse to be placed than to be knocked about."

Jermyn sighed.

"It seems a little unfair," he grumbled. "All through this afternoon I have had to watch my most cunning deliveries treated entirely without respect by you, young lady, and now, when my time for revenge has come —"

"I only made fifteen and you were in for a quarter of an hour," Mary interrupted. "Your side won, anyway."

Jermyn was looking down the avenue. Far away in the distance was a little cloud of dust.

"What on earth is that?" he exclaimed. "It doesn't look large enough for a car."

"Motor bicycle," one of the boys replied. "Isn't he ripping along, too!"

Jermyn frowned slightly.

"I hate the sight of the things," he declared, "and of the fellows who ride them. They all look as though they had escaped from some other planet."

Lakenham had suddenly risen from his prone position upon the grass, and was sitting upright. Exercise seemed scarcely to have agreed with him. The flush upon his cheeks was almost purple and his forehead was still bathed in perspiration.

"It's my man," he said. "Sorry his hobby offends your æsthetic taste, Jermyn, but it's the fellow's one weakness. He will bring that wretched machine along wherever he goes. Comes in useful sometimes, though. He's been in to Norwich for me to-day."

"To Norwich?" Jermyn repeated. "What on earth did you want to send him there for?"

Lakenham did not at once reply. With some effort he struggled to his feet and brushed the fir needles from his white flannel clothes. He was smiling very slightly to himself, but it was a smile which did not improve his appearance. His eyes seemed to have grown smaller, to have receded further into his head. The sensual curve of his lips had become a cruel one. Sybil, who happened to glance across at him at that moment, shivered. Was it her fancy, she wondered, or was there really anything significant in the fact that he looked steadily at her before he replied?

"Something I wanted and he offered to fetch for me. He thinks nothing of thirty or forty miles on that thing. I'll go in and have a word with him."

"Help me up first, Aynesworth," Lucille ordered. "I, too, am going into the house. Something is coming. I don't know what it is but it looks disagreeable."

Lucille had not been playing cricket. Notwithstanding the simplicity of her white lace gown and her large picture hat, she seemed somehow, by the perfection of her toilette, its slightly foreign note, perhaps, to be in some degree removed from any kinship with the others. She looked as though she had stepped out of some wonderful French picture of modern life; as though she belonged, indeed, to a more artificial world whose standards of beauty were more precise. Mary was watching her curiously.

"Isn't she beautiful!" she whispered to one of the boys.

"Ripping!" the boy agreed. "I think your sister's better-looking, though. Besides, she can run about almost as well as you can, and she can throw quite de-

cently. I don't think the Duchess could run far in those clothes."

Mary rewarded him with a glance.

"There isn't anybody quite like Sybil," she admitted. "The Duchess, though, looks so much like a picture."

Lucille pointed with the tip of her parasol to the landscape.

"What is this that is coming upon us, Jermyn?" she asked. "I am beginning to shiver already."

A faint white mist had come rolling up across the park and was stretched like a semi-transparent veil across the blue sky. The sun, which had been blazing down upon them only a few minutes ago, was now half obscured, a great crimson ball whose fierce heat was suddenly tempered.

"It's just a North Sea mist," Jermyn told her. "It won't last. We get them now and then in the middle of summer."

"I do not find it pleasant," Lucille decided. "I shall go indoors."

She moved slowly across the lawn towards the open door through which Lakenham had already vanished. Sybil, whose eyes followed her until she had disappeared, suddenly shivered. Jermyn, who was secretly holding her hand, realized that it had grown colder. He sprang to his feet.

"You are chilly!" he exclaimed. "Shall we go in?"

"It was only for a moment," she assured him. "This mist looked so weird coming in the middle of a hot afternoon. Do you see how strangely it seems to hang about the trees?"

"It will have gone in a few minutes," he declared, looking at her a little anxiously. "Shall we go into the library? Or would you like to try the conservatories? You'll find it hot enough there."

She was looking once more at the open door, through which first Lord Lakenham and now Lucille had passed. She shook her head slowly.

"No," she murmured, "let us stay here. I like to be out of doors, only I think that I should like to walk for a minute. I am stiff."

Jermyn pulled her to her feet. The brilliant color of a few minutes ago had certainly left her cheeks. She looked very pale and very slight in her white flannel dress and shirt with the low collar.

"What a child you are!" he laughed, as he drew her arm through his. "Are you always so susceptible to impressions?"

She drew quite close to him. She pressed his arm as though the touch of it gave her confidence.

"I am not always so queer," she whispered softly, "only somehow or other these last few hours seem too wonderful. I can't realize — I try and I try but it seems almost impossible. I am afraid," she went on, raising her head slowly and looking at him; "I am afraid of having them snatched away. I seem to be searching everywhere for omens. The mist almost frightened me. It was such a sudden change — one moment the sunshine, the blue sky, the butterflies, the humming of bees, and another moment nothing — just a cold, gray mist. It frightened me. And — and Lord Lakenham — why did he stare at me like that?"

Jermyn looked at her as one might look at an imaginative child.

"I am sorry that you dislike Aynesworth so much," he said. "It is shocking bad luck that he happened to be here at all."

"He isn't staying — much longer, is he?"

"He is off to-morrow, I believe," Jermyn replied. "To tell you the honest truth," he added, "I am rather glad you dislike him, for the way he looks at you sometimes makes me feel inclined to kick him."

She shuddered.

"I used to think that I could never really hate anybody," she continued, "but I do hate Lord Lakenham. He seems to me like some one who ought not to be alive. If I were to hear to-morrow that he was dead, I should be glad — glad!"

"My dear Sybil!"

"I cannot help it!" she went on, with a little note of passion throbbing in her tone. "I have that feeling about him. I never thought that I was cruel, I never felt cruel before, but I wish he were dead! I should be glad if he were dead! Tell me why you are looking like that, Jermyn? Tell me exactly what you are thinking?"

"Shall I?"

"You simply must," she insisted.

"I was wondering," he told her, "if Lakenham were in any way connected with that mysterious part of your biography which it so terrified you to see in the *Tatler*?"

She seemed suddenly to become once more like a creature of stone. Her whisper scarcely reached his ears.

"You are wondering that?"

"Doesn't it seem reasonable?" he asked. "Your dislike of him is a little extreme, isn't it? You must

have met many men of his type. You have not wished them all dead."

She drew her arm quietly away from his.

"You are right," she said slowly. "Lord Lakenham is connected with what you call that mysterious part of my biography. Take me somewhere, Jermyn, where we can be really alone, and I'll tell you — I'll tell you although I don't think that the world will ever be quite the same place to me again."

He shook his head, looking at her all the time with a smile upon his lips and a look in his eyes which are the things a woman craves for more than anything in the world from the man she loves.

"You baby!" he murmured. "I haven't the least curiosity. It wouldn't interest me in the slightest. Why do you put yourself through such a purgatory of imaginings? Nothing that you could say or could tell me would make the slightest difference. Nothing can alter what you are, what I know that you are. You see, I am conceited enough to believe absolutely in myself as well as in you. Let us steal off into the library and have tea there alone. All these young people will do very well without us. We have heaps of plans to make yet."

They had strolled across the lawn on to one of the garden paths. She looked at him for a moment with an eagerness which had in it something almost fierce. Then she broke into a little peal of laughter — real, natural, delightful laughter. She was once more herself; her eyes besought him, tantalized him.

"If only they couldn't see us," she whispered, "and you weren't so tall!"

He took a skillful turn to the left.

"These laurel bushes," he assured her, "are as dense as a brick wall, and as regards my height —"

Her arms were around his neck, holding him tighter and tighter. He was amazed at their strength.

"You won't let me go — you won't ever let me go?" she pleaded.

He took her bodily into his arms.

"Dear," he answered, "there isn't anything in this world or any other world that shall take you out of my life or out of my heart!"

The mist passed. Once more the sunshine streamed down upon them. As they crossed the lawn, half an hour later, they met Lucille slowly emerging from the house. She stood looking at them with the shadow of a strange smile upon her lips.

"So the grayness has all passed away," she remarked, "and we are going to have tea out here after all. What can have happened to Aynesworth, I wonder? He looks like a big boy chuckling over some huge joke."

Lakenham was certainly looking immensely pleased with himself. He was standing upon the lawn with a whisky-and-soda in one hand and a piece of bread and butter in the other. His legs were a little apart. He was looking over towards Jermyn and Sybil with the satisfied smile of a man who has accomplished something worth doing.

"You look," Jermyn said, "as though you had received good news."

Lakenham threw back his head and a moment later set down his empty tumbler.

"I have," he replied,—"the best! Miss Cluley, you've lost all your color. Jermyn makes you do too much."

"I am afraid that the cricket was a little exhausting," Jermyn admitted. "After tea I think we'll let those youngsters look after themselves."

"We want you to play tennis," Mary begged,— "you and I against the two boys. Lord Lakenham says you are awfully good. Do play! These boys think they have a chance and I'd love to beat them. Arnold is rather a dear but he is so conceited. We will beat them, won't we?"

Jermyn glanced at Sybil.

"Do play," she murmured. "I shall love to look on."

"We will all look on," Lakenham decided. "Perhaps my chance will come then to talk for a little time with Miss Cluley. I consider that she has been most shamelessly monopolized ever since she arrived here."

Sybil sighed.

"You must remember, all of you," she replied, "that Sir Jermyn is my dramatist. Naturally he has a great deal to say to me."

Lakenham smiled as he drew out his cigarette case from his pocket.

"I, too," he declared, looking at her boldly, "can find something to say to you, Miss Cluley. I am only longing for the opportunity."

There was a moment's silence. Jermyn, who had gone away to fetch his racquet, came towards them, frowning slightly. He had somehow the feeling that he was deserting Sybil.

"Are you sure that you wouldn't rather come for a walk or do something?" he asked her, doubtfully.

She smiled back at him reassuringly.

"No, I am going to sit under the trees here and

watch," she insisted. "Besides, Lord Lakenham has something to say to me. He has made so many charming speeches that I am really curious to find out how long he will be able to keep it up!"

CHAPTER X

Lucille, Sybil and Lakenham sat in deep wicker chairs in a shady corner of the lawn, watching the tennis. Before the first game was over, however, Lucille, with a little sigh of regret, rose gracefully to her feet.

"It does not amuse me to watch those violent pastimes," she confessed. "Lord Lakenham has been dying to talk to you all day, Miss Cluley. He shall have his opportunity. I will write some necessary letters and earn his undying gratitude. Only, accept a word of advice from me. Believe nothing that he says. I consider him to be the most shameless person I have met with in the whole course of my experience."

Sybil's eyes followed her almost despairingly as she moved slowly towards the house. Lakenham changed at once into her vacant chair. Jermyn, from his place upon the courts, saw what had happened and promptly served two faults.

"Lucille will chaff one all the time," Lakenham remarked. "Bit useful with her tongue, too, isn't she? All the same, I have been rather anxious to have a little chat with you, Miss Cluley."

"Really?"

"You know," he went on, "I wish you wouldn't behave as though I wanted to eat you up, or something of that sort. I am of a forgiving nature. I harbor no animosity and I bear no grudges."

She knew then that he remembered. Everything for a moment seemed to recede from her. The voices of the tennis players seemed to come from some far-off world. The breeze in the trees, the perfume of the burnt cedars, the fragrance of the roses, always insistent, surely belonged to one of those halcyon, half-forgotten days! This was another world in which she was living now — the world of her misery!

"You see, my memory isn't quite so rotten as you must have thought it was," Lakenham continued. "I haven't forgotten all about the Gayety Theatre at Blackpool and Miss May Marvis."

She was trembling. Her eyes, which sought his now, were full of tears.

"The money," she faltered. "I ought to have sent you the money back. Oh! I have thought of it a hundred times but I was afraid — I was afraid that you might trace me through it. It was wicked of me!"

He laughed loudly, almost boisterously.

"You silly child!" he exclaimed. "What do you suppose that few pounds meant to me? You can't imagine I ever intended you to repay it? It was a gift, of course. It was your broken promise that I minded."

She looked at him like a wounded animal. Nothing that he could possibly have said could have hurt so much.

"I was mad!" she murmured. "We were both half starved; the company had come to grief; we hadn't even the money for our tickets to London, and they told me that Mary wouldn't live unless I could take her to a nursing home where she was properly looked after. But I was mad — I know it! I couldn't — I shouldn't really ever have kept my word."

"You took the money," he reminded her, "and you took it upon that understanding."

A note of passion crept into her tone.

"I had to have it!" she declared. "Call it thieving, if you like. Charge me with theft — I'll plead guilty. I did steal the money. I stole it for her. Look at her now. Do you see how healthy she is? Wasn't it worth it?"

"I tell you that I do not care," he persisted, "to think of the money. I think rather of your promise — the promise which still remains."

She sat quite still, with closed eyes.

"I wish," he went on, "you wouldn't take it for granted that I was an enemy."

"If you are not an enemy," she replied swiftly, "why do you mention it at all? Why could you not have pretended that you did not recognize me, and have gone away? What does it matter to you? It is all over and done with."

He laughed in a self-satisfied sort of way.

"Miss Sybil," he said, "I tell you frankly that I'm not unselfish enough for those things. I warn you that I am going to give you a bit of a shock. It's a regular queer sort of thing that's happened to me. Oh, you'll be interested presently, if you'll listen! Don't understand it myself a bit," he continued, speaking half to himself now and watching the smoke from the cigarette which he had just lit curl its way upwards. "Of course, I've had heaps of affairs, and the marriage traps I've escaped from — God bless my soul, I ought to write my memoirs or whatever you call it, just to show people what a fellow with a title and a big income has to go through! One gets as wily to-

wards forty as an old cock pheasant at the end of the season. That's what makes it so surprising."

"Makes what so surprising?" she asked.

He turned and looked at her. She began to shiver. A glimmering of the truth forced its way in upon her consciousness. There were things in his face — the ugly things as they seemed to her.

"You're not going to insult me — here!"

He smiled confidently.

"If you call it an insult," he replied, "I am going to insult you in a new and unprecedented fashion. I am going to insult you in a way that pretty nearly any girl in London would jump at. I am going to show you that I, too, am capable of big things when I make up my mind. I am going to ask you to chuck Jermyn and marry me. Do you hear — marry me? I'll make you Marchioness of Lakenham!"

Her fingers were nervously entwined in the basket-work of her chair. She sat up a little. She even ventured to laugh uneasily and to look at him once more. The complacency upon his face was sublime.

"Of course you are joking!" she ventured.

"Joking be — hanged!" he exclaimed. "No wonder you're surprised! I don't know what it means myself," he went on, in a low tone. "I've been gone on women before, and when I've been gone on 'em I've generally had my own way or got over it pretty soon. But this time — well, I don't understand it. I saw you last night and I haven't rested since. There's something in my blood — I don't know what it is but it will never be still until you belong to me. And I am willing to pay. I'll pay the price. You've got to throw Jermyn over and marry me."

She began to laugh. To his ears, which were not trained to niceties, it seemed to be a perfectly natural laugh.

"Throw Jermyn over — for you!"

She looked at the slim figure upon the lawn, with his clean-cut face, his deep-set gray eyes. She heard his voice, clear and pleasant, as he called to his partner. Then she looked back to the man who lounged by her side.

"Do you think that I am mad," she asked him, "even if you are? Do you think that I would give up Jermyn for such a creature as you are?"

His face darkened but he showed no anger.

"I think you'll be mad if you try any games on with me," he replied. "I can stop your marrying Jermyn and you know it. You can take my word for it, too, if you don't agree to my terms, that I shall do it."

"You mean that you will tell him?"

"That or any other dirty trick," Lakenham assured her promptly. "Mind you, I know I'm a fool. I might have put things very differently to you. I might have insisted, even now, that you carried out your bargain."

They were quite silent for some time. Then Sybil rose quietly to her feet.

"Where are you going?" he asked roughly.

"I am going to tell Jermyn," she answered composedly, "when he has finished this game, that you have insulted me. I am going to tell him exactly what happened at Blackpool, explain to him the position I was in, and the despicable means I made use of to get out of it. I am going to tell him that one

of us will have to leave here at once. He shall choose for himself which it is to be."

Lakenham, too, rose to his feet.

"Now, listen," he said. "That's all right, but what do you suppose Jermyn will do? He'll send me away right enough, but what about you? Do you suppose that he'll marry you? You don't know Jermyn if you believe that! I tell you he's a prig of the first water. He's the most stuck-up, opinionated, narrow-minded person that ever breathed. He will do what he thinks right in spite of anything, but let me tell you this — he won't marry you after he's heard about Blackpool. He's never forgiven a person yet who told him a lie or a half lie. He won't begin by forgiving you. Do you think he hasn't felt scruples? Do you think he wanted to bring a mistress here who had adorned the musical comedy stage a few years ago, even though she is acting at the theatres now? Not he! He swallowed it because he's in love with you and because he believes in you. Go and tell him the truth. I've nothing to lose. You'll probably be glad to listen to me afterwards."

She sat down again. Her first impulse had passed away. She was conscious of a fierce desire to temporize with this man, to do anything in the world sooner than risk for a moment her new-found and amazing happiness. He saw her hesitation and he pursued, as he thought, his own advantage.

"Sybil," he continued, "I haven't said much about it yet — you haven't given me a chance — but I want you to remember that although Jermyn may be fond of you in his way, I am just as fond of you in mine. Jermyn will want you to live up in the clouds with

him. You'll find it chilly there sometimes. I'll keep your feet upon the earth, little woman, and I'll lead you among the pleasant places. The Lakenham jewels are worth looking at, and I can make people receive you wherever you choose to go. I'm fond of you, you witch! What you've done I don't know but I'm madly fond of you. I'll chuck all those little affairs you may have heard of. There shall never be another, I promise it. It's time I settled down, and I will. You think this over, Sybil. There's no hurry for a few hours. You're full of the idea of marrying Jermyn, just now, and it's carried you away a bit. If you want my honest opinion about it, I think that the woman who marries Jermyn will have a plaguey dull time of it."

She turned towards him.

"If I told you," she pleaded, "that I love Jermyn, that no other man in the world could take his place — no, not for a single second! — wouldn't that make any difference? Wouldn't you let me off then?"

"No," he answered stolidly, "I wouldn't! You may feel like that just now. He writes your plays for you and I suppose you think him a sort of god. That kind of person's all very well until you try to live with him."

The set was over. Already Jermyn and Mary, flushed with triumph, were on their way towards them.

"Six-three!" the latter called out, waving her racquet. "They really hadn't a look in. If only I could have served decently it would have been a love set."

"Think it over for a few hours," Lakenham muttered in a hoarse undertone. "I'll say nothing until

the evening. Play me a game of billiards after dinner. You hate bridge, anyway. You can give me your answer then."

She hesitated. Jermyn was already close to them when he was intercepted by the butler, who delivered a message. He hesitated.

"I am wanted on the telephone," he told Sybil. "I'll be out again in half a moment."

"Don't hurry," Lakenham cried cheerfully. "I don't consider I've had half an inning with Miss Cluley yet. We've lots more to say to one another."

"Better get it over quickly, then," Jermyn replied over his shoulder. "You'll have no more opportunity after I get back. I see a car-load full from the barracks coming across the park. I asked some of them over to play tennis. I shan't be a minute, Sybil."

He turned towards the house. Sybil at first seemed inclined to follow him but Lakenham blocked the way.

"Be sensible, little woman," he urged. "Don't quarrel with me. I'm a nasty-tempered fellow to have on the other side. Remember, after all, that I am doing the square thing: ignoring the fact that you treated me shamefully, doing all that a fellow can do who's in love with you. I am asking you to be my wife. I don't want to boast but it isn't a trifle. It's a new idea to you and I daresay it hurts just at first to think about chucking Jermyn, but you know in the long run you've got to do it. Don't do anything rash. Take an hour or two to think it over. Promise that you'll play me that game of billiards after dinner? That's all I ask for now. What do you say?"

"It will be of no use," she answered quietly. "I

shall never change my mind. But I will play billiards with you after dinner. Only I tell you this now — I may as well. If you come between me and Jermyn, if I am never to belong to him, then I shall never belong to any one."

He smiled a little fatuously, a little confidently. He had at any rate scored a first success.

"We shall see," he said.

Jermyn reappeared, a few minutes later, with his newly arrived guests. Lakenham and Sybil strolled up to meet them, and some sets at tennis were quickly arranged.

"It was really you who were wanted on the telephone, Lakenham," Jermyn grumbled. "Fellow named Norden Smith — an American, I think — wanted to know whether you were here."

"The devil he did!" Lakenham remarked. "Sure it wasn't Mrs. Norden Smith?"

Jermyn shook his head.

"Man's voice, right enough," he replied. "Said he'd known you in America and found himself in the neighborhood. Would rather like to say how do you do to you. He's off to Lincoln early to-morrow morning."

There was a peculiar and unpleasant look for a moment in Lakenham's face. He was smiling as though at some recollection that appealed a little grimly to his sense of humor.

"I scarcely remember the fellow," he declared. "He had a charming wife, though, and they were very civil to me, in their way, in New York."

"I gathered from what he said that they had entertained you," Jermyn said, "so I asked him to dine, of course, but he preferred to come in afterwards.

Said he'd look you up about half-past nine for a few minutes."

"Hope he won't expect to be asked down to Somerset," Lakenham remarked. "I want to be in Scotland at least three weeks. They're so jolly hospitable over there, though, these Americans, that you don't — I say, Jermyn, you're not taking Miss Cluley away?"

"Absolutely," Jermyn replied firmly. "Here's Lucille, looking, as usual, like a picture. You can either play tennis or flirt with her to your heart's content. I am terrified to think that I have left Sybil so long near such a redoubtable lady-killer."

She turned and laughed daringly into Lakenham's face.

"My dear Jermyn," she said, "you have discretion! Lord Lakenham has been making flagrant love to me. I very nearly had to call you."

Lakenham grinned. This was the sort of humor he appreciated!

"Gad!" he exclaimed, looking at Sybil's slim figure with something in his eyes which Jermyn hated, "if only I'd had another half-hour I believe I might have had a chance, after all."

Jermyn smiled and pointed to the gray stone carving on the front of the house.

"'What I have, I hold,'" he quoted. "You are just a few days too late, my gallant cousin."

Lakenham laughed. He stood with his hands in his pockets — a typical attitude — burly, dogged, confident.

"We'll match mottoes, Jermyn," he said. "You known mine? —'I hope, I win!'"

Jermyn drew Sybil's arm through his and turned away.

"I shall at once," he declared, "remove Miss Cluley from the sphere of your influence!"

CHAPTER XI

Dinner that night at Annerley was a somewhat memorable meal for all who took part in it. Besides the house-party, two men from the neighboring barracks had remained over, and the doctor who had played bridge the night before had been sent for. From the first, the atmosphere had been a little electric. Sybil, from the moment of taking her place at the table, had seemed animated by the highest spirits. She had walked into the room as though she were walking on air. The poise of her neck, the carriage of her lithe body, appeared alike imbued with some nameless enchantment. She had more color than usual, her eyes were brilliant, her mouth radiant with smiles. She was all the time the life of the dinner-party, the whole centre of attraction. At the head of the table Lucille, who herself was wonderfully dressed in black and silver, with strange jewels glistening at her bosom, sat and watched and listened. The village doctor was on her left, the elder of the two officers from the barracks on her right. They paid her polite attentions but their eyes were fixed upon Sybil. She seemed, indeed, to have found an unaccustomed vein of levity. She laughed boldly in Lakenham's face; she appeared either to have conquered or to have completely forgotten her aversion to him. Jermyn watched her all the time, his eyes shining with admiration, yet even he, too, now and then

wondered. If she were not actually flirting with Lord Lakenham, she was at any rate toying with his advances, laughing indulgently at his compliments, mocking at his rather too obvious earnestness, yet always with the faint reserve of coquetry which to a man like Lakenham was so maddening.

Although they had sat down to dinner early, it was half-past nine before they rose from the table. There was no question of separation for the cigars and cigarettes had already been served. Jermyn looked eagerly across at Sybil.

"At last!" he whispered under his breath. "Lakenham, you and Lucille, Doctor Brownrigg, Captain Mason and Major Lethersett, must cut out for bridge. Miss Cluley and I are going to have a talk over the play."

Lakenham laughed heavily. He was very flushed and his eyes were bright.

"Not a bit of it, Jermyn, old fellow," he replied. "Miss Cluley and I have fixed that all up. It's my last night and she's going to play me a fifty up at billiards."

Jermyn was silent for a moment. His eyes sought Sybil's. She was suddenly very still and cold.

"Do you really care about billiards, Sybil?" he asked, a little doubtfully.

"I have promised Lord Lakenham to have one game," she answered. "After that we can do whatever you like."

Jermyn walked with them into the hall. Notwithstanding Sybil's altered demeanor, he was conscious of a strange disinclination to leave her alone with Lakenham. Even when he had had the lights lit in the bil-

liard-room and had offered to mark, an offer which Lakenham promptly refused, he lingered on one pretext or another.

"I think I'll watch the game," he decided. "They don't want me for bridge."

"My dear fellow," Lakenham replied, chalking his cue, "you'll be shockingly in the way. I can't possibly say nice things to Miss Cluley while you're around. It isn't giving either of us a chance. Time enough for you later on."

Jermyn looked across at Sybil but she seemed for some reason to be avoiding his eyes. He shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Well," he said, "I shall be in the library with the other people when you have finished. Don't tire yourself, Sybil. You have had plenty of running about to-day."

"I am going to rest after every stroke," she laughed, "and Lord Lakenham is going to give me twenty in fifty, so I don't think our game ought to last very long."

"You won't expect me to hurry over it!" Lakenham protested, ardently.

Sybil was leaning with her back against the billiard table. She waved her hand to Jermyn.

"If we are not out in half an hour," she begged, "come and rescue me."

"I shan't allow you a second longer," he replied, smiling at her. "I'll go and see how the bridge is getting on."

He left the room, closing the door behind him, and made his way to the library. The remaining four of his guests had just started a rubber. They had drawn

a table up to the open windows and had turned out all the lights in the room except a couple of standard lamps, which stood on either side of the table. Jermyn threw himself into a low chair by Lucille's side. She was dummy at the moment and she looked down at him with a faint smile. Her hand rested upon his.

"Miss Cluley seems to be overcoming her aversion to Aynesworth," she murmured.

He was conscious of the affront of her words; conscious, too, of a peculiar uneasiness, which was not exactly jealousy and yet for which he could not wholly account.

"Sybil is never discourteous to any one," he said calmly. "She may or may not appreciate Aynesworth's attentions. She at least is considerate enough to remember that he is my kinsman and her fellow-guest. I think that she is quite right to try and conquer her antipathy to him."

Lucille smiled once more.

"You will make a model husband, my dear Jermyn!"

"I shall do my best," he answered. "I do not fancy that I shall find it very troublesome to be what you call a model husband to Sybil. You see, I happen to be very fond of her."

The play of the hand had only just commenced. Lucille rose abruptly to her feet.

"Come here," she said, moving towards the open window.

Jermyn obeyed her at once. They stepped out on to the avenue. The moon had not yet risen, and coming directly from the lighted room the deep violet twilight seemed full of shadows. She stood with him behind a little clump of syringa bushes. Jermyn, with

the natural impressionability of an artist always on the lookout for effects, could scarcely fail to appreciate how striking a picture she made with her white face, her red lips and blazing eyes. She swayed a little towards him.

"Jermyn, haven't you any pity at all?" she whispered passionately. "If you go on parading your affection for that little chit of an actress before me, I shall say something foolish. I shall give myself away. You mustn't do it, Jermyn. Haven't you any heart at all?"

For a moment he made no reply. He was realizing the immense mistake he had made when he had answered her letter of self-invitation in the affirmative and begged her to come and play hostess at Annerley. He was man of the world enough to realize exactly the position, to realize, too, that short of brutality he could meet it only by strategy. The pose he decided to assume sat upon him naturally enough.

"My dear Lucille," he protested, "why try to flirt with me? The impressionable youth of two great cities are already your victims. Remember I have seen them fall. I have seen your wiles from the inside. Perhaps," he added, with a sigh, "even if I am partially cured, I myself have once felt the spell."

"You!" she muttered bitterly. "You! You feel nothing. You are only the shadow of a man. You can open your heart to a little chit of a girl when you keep it closed to me — Lucille de Sayers!"

He raised her hand to his lips. Even he could scarcely help thinking how beautiful her slim, white fingers were. She had all the grace of long limbs, exceedingly delicate and shapely. Nevertheless, he

moved slightly so that he stood now in the little ray of light streaming out from the room.

"I suppose it was our old friendship which saved me," he declared. "Do you hear that? They are dealing."

From where they stood they could hear the soft patter of cards upon the green baize of the table. Lucille did not move for a moment. Her bosom was rising and falling quickly, there was a storm in her eyes.

"You are clever, my dear Jermyn," she murmured. "Some day, perhaps — well, we shall see."

She walked away and took her place at the table. Jermyn strolled off into the shadows of the garden, threaded a laurel shrubbery and stood by the lake. He was sensitive enough to feel keenly the little scene which had been precipitated upon him, but at the back of it all the greater happiness prevailed. Life had never seemed so splendid to him as in those few minutes when he walked in the gardens he loved and finally turned his face towards the house, curiously picturesque in its indistinctness, with the lights streaming from every window. The half-hour was up. In a few minutes Sybil would be his once more.

He entered the house through the library window and watched the game, looking over Lucille's shoulder. She did not once glance towards him. Then the door was opened and the butler appeared, ushering in a visitor.

"Mr. Norden Smith, sir," he announced, "to see the Marquis of Lakenham."

Jermyn turned at once to greet his visitor. He was, as a matter of fact, rather glad of the distraction. He was glad, too, of so plausible an excuse for going in

and breaking up that billiard match, which apparently was still continuing. Mr. Norden Smith was a tall, colorless, thin American, loosely built, with a long, intelligent face and high forehead. He was wearing dinner clothes of a somewhat transatlantic cut, and a small, precisely tied black bow. Jermyn advanced to meet him and held out his hand.

"You are a friend of Lakenham's, I understand," he remarked. "I am very glad you came over. I spoke to you on the telephone, I think. My name is Annerley."

"Glad to meet you, Sir Jermyn Annerley, I am sure," Mr. Norden Smith replied. "Lord Lakenham stayed with us out in New York, and he made me promise that I'd look him up if ever I found myself in this country. I happened to hear by accident that he was staying here but I've no wish to intrude. I won't stay longer than just to shake hands with him, if he is anywhere about."

"You mustn't think of hurrying," Jermyn declared, hospitably. "Come along and I'll take you to him. He's playing billiards."

"That's very kind of you," Mr. Norden Smith answered. "I'll be delighted. Say, this house of yours is marvelously attractive to an American — all these old pictures and things! Look as though they'd sort of been born with the place, you know. Mighty impressive, I can tell you."

Jermyn smiled as he led his guest across the hall.

"We are rather proud of Annerley," he admitted. "You see my people have been here uninterruptedly for four hundred and sixty years, so naturally we managed to collect a good many trifles in that time."

Mr. Norden Smith looked around him with typical curiosity. He was expressing his wonder at the size of a suit of armor when Jermyn threw open the door of the billiard-room. Then he stopped suddenly in his speech. Jermyn stood upon the threshold, his right hand gripping the side of the door, absolutely motionless, bereft for a moment of all power of speech, a numb, nerveless figure. The American, looking over his shoulder, was the first to break the silence.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "What's happened here?"

Jermyn clutched at his companion and drew him into the room. His voice, when he spoke, seemed to come from a long way off. He was scarcely conscious that it belonged to himself.

"Close the door!" he ordered. "We mustn't let any one come in!"

Lying a yard or two in the room was Lakenham, flat upon his back, with one arm gripping the leg of the billiard table, as though he had tried to draw himself up and failed. Far above him, curling its way to the ceiling, hovered a thin blue cloud of smoke. There was a faint smell of gunpowder in the air, and in the centre of his crumpled white shirt front a little hole, with brown specks around it. Jermyn looked around the room wildly. There was no sign of any other person there. On the floor by the side of the prostrate man was Sybil's fan and the cue she had been playing with, and one or two of the roses, broken off close to the stalk, which she had been wearing. Jermyn shivered.

"I was a fool to have left them!" he muttered, with a little sob in his throat.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "What's happened here?"

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"Left whom?" Mr. Norden Smith asked quickly.

Jermyn half closed his eyes. It seemed to him at that moment that he could see the struggle — Lakenham, flushed with wine, taunted, on fire with his admiration; and Sybil, frightened at last, struggling to escape, his hand probably upon her mouth. He wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead.

"Stay here," he said to his companion. "There's a doctor in the other room. I'll fetch him."

CHAPTER XII

The room was still swaying before Jermyn's eyes as he backed towards the door. Mr. Norden Smith, however, had quietly slipped in front of him.

"One moment, Sir Jermyn," the latter said calmly. "With whom did you say that Lord Lakenham was playing billiards?"

"With Miss Sybil Cluley," Jermyn replied.

"The young lady whom I heard in the village this afternoon that you were engaged to marry?"

"Yes!"

Mr. Norden Smith listened intently. There seemed to be no one about. Through the open windows they heard a little peal of laughter from the bridge-table.

"Collect yourself for a moment, Sir Jermyn. Something terrible has happened here. If you act too hastily you may make it more terrible still. Do you see those things upon the floor?"

Jermyn stared at them without speech.

"Now I am a criminal lawyer," Mr. Norden Smith continued, "and if I were to speak to you from the point of view of the law, I should say — 'Touch nothing.' On the other hand, there is another point of view. I am in a foreign country and my profession here carries no obligations with it. I am free, therefore, to offer you the advice of a guest. I know nothing about the merits of any dispute which Miss

Sybil Cluley and Lord Lakenham may have had, but if I were you I think I should conceal those very obvious signs of a struggle."

The man's calm tone was having its effect upon Jermyn. He began to realize the situation more clearly. The sick feeling of horror which had almost overcome him was still there, but he was feeling better able to withstand it.

"You are right," he muttered. "I was a fool not to think of it."

He stooped down and groped about the floor near where Lord Lakenham was lying. There were half-a-dozen crushed roses from the bouquet which he had sent to her room before dinner, lying just underneath the table, a little rosette of ivory satin, a fragment of lace from her scarf. He picked them up jealously and stuffed them into his pocket. Mr. Norden Smith looked on approvingly.

"Little pieces of circumstantial evidence like that," he remarked, "will sometimes hang an innocent person. If Lord Lakenham has been shot by anybody, and that certainly seems to be the case, the young lady must take her chance. There is no need, however, to prejudice it by handing up testimony like that."

"She didn't do it!" Jermyn gasped. "Sybil would never have hurt any one!"

"All the more reason, then," Mr. Norden Smith pointed out, "for concealing those little scraps of evidence, which certainly seem to point towards a struggle. And now, if there is really such a person in the house as a doctor, wouldn't it be best for you to fetch him?"

Like a man in a dream, Jermyn strode across the

hall into the library. Doctor Brownrigg was just about to play a hand. Jermyn tapped him on the shoulder.

"Brownrigg," he said, "you're wanted. Will you come with me at once, please?"

The doctor looked around, a little surprised. He was a heavy man and his instincts were not particularly quick. He was also enjoying his bridge exceedingly.

"Is it the telephone?" he inquired, irritably. "I will answer it as soon as I have played this hand. I suppose it's old mother Gastill again with her rheumatism. These people expect me to go and give them opium every —"

"My dear Jermyn," Lucille exclaimed, "what on earth is the matter with you? Have you been seeing ghosts?"

The doctor still sat placidly in his place. Jermyn stretched out his arm, sweeping some of the cards from the table.

"Come with me this moment, Brownrigg," he said, gripping his shoulder. "Never mind your hand. It is not a telephone message. Something has happened here — in the house."

The little party all rose to their feet. Dr. Brownrigg sprang up quickly enough now and accompanied Jermyn out of the room. The others followed a few yards behind.

"What is it?" the doctor asked. "What is it, eh? Any one taken ill suddenly?"

"Lakenham is lying in the billiard-room," Jermyn answered. "He seems to have shot himself, or — been shot by accident. I believe he's dead."

"Good God!" Dr. Brownrigg muttered.

He quickened his pace. They entered the billiard-

room. Jermyn closed the door firmly behind them. Mr. Norden Smith was on his knees, bending over the prostrate body. He looked up as the doctor entered.

"I don't think he's dead," he remarked. "The wound seems very near the heart, to me, but he is certainly breathing."

The doctor made a brief examination. When he arose, he was looking very grave.

"Lord Lakenham is alive," he said. "I cannot say anything more until I have examined the wound. I should like him carried up to a bedroom and I must telephone for some instruments and drugs. It may be necessary to operate. I should like further advice, too. Send for some of your men-servants, and a low basket chair or anything that will do for a litter, Sir Jermyn."

They carried Lakenham upstairs and laid him on the bed in an unoccupied bedroom. The telephone messages were despatched. The fastest motor-car in the garage was already on its way to Norwich to bring out a celebrated surgeon. Meanwhile, the doctor, at his own request, was left alone with his patient. Lakenham was unconscious but he still lived. Downstairs, the two other guests took their leave and departed. Jermyn found Lucille sitting in the hall.

"He is still alive?" she inquired.

"He is still alive," Jermyn replied.

She came and passed her arm through his.

"Jermyn dear, this is all so horrible," she said softly. "Come and sit down somewhere quite quietly, somewhere where we can be alone. There is a question I must ask you."

She led the way into the library. He followed her almost like a man in a dream. The card-table was still

there, the dummy's hand spread out upon the table, the liqueur glasses, half-empty, at the side. She poured out some brandy and made him drink it.

"Jermyn," she asked, "have you seen Miss Cluley?"

"No," he answered; "have you?"

She nodded and glanced anxiously towards the door. After a moment's hesitation she rose and fastened the French-windows which led into the garden. Then she came back and stood by his side.

"Listen," she said. "There will be some one here from the police station before very long. Dr. Brownrigg told me that he had been obliged to telephone there. As you can very well imagine, I do not like Miss Cluley, but I don't want to see her give herself away completely."

Jermyn caught hold of the edge of the mantelpiece by which he was standing.

"You don't believe," he gasped,—"you don't believe that Sybil shot him?"

"I know that she did," Lucille replied calmly.

There was a moment's awful silence. Jermyn's face was like marble. Everything in the room was indistinct to him. He saw only Lucille's eyes shining with sympathy, heard only her regretful, convincing words.

"Jermyn," she pleaded, "you must face this matter like a man. For these few moments, at any rate, you must look the facts in the face and put sentiment on one side. I would not for the world say a thing against Sybil Cluley, but it is quite certain that Aynesworth knew something about her past which she herself was exceedingly anxious that he should not reveal to you. That much I think you must half know yourself. No, don't trouble to interrupt me. It is the

truth. You remember that she fainted last night at something which she saw in the *Tatler*. She fainted, horror-stricken at the idea that as soon as Aynesworth saw that little notice of her career he would be supplied with the missing link in the chain of his memory. Jermyn, an hour afterwards that interview was cut out of every illustrated paper in the house. Aynesworth sent to Norwich to-day — you saw his man returning on his motor-bicycle — and got copies. Directly he saw them, he remembered. You saw how she changed towards him. She flirted with him flagrantly at dinner-time. She did her best to bribe him to silence. He probably wanted more than she was willing to give. That isn't my affair. At this moment it isn't yours. Anyway, there is no doubt that they quarreled in the billiard-room this evening. Look at it any way you like, Jermyn. Even the angels are foolish sometimes, you know, and this is the one moment in your life when, for your own sake, you must face the truth. There isn't the faintest doubt in the world that Sybil Cluley shot Aynesworth sooner than have him tell you of a little episode which I fancy might have disturbed even your perfect faith in her."

"I can't believe it!" Jermyn exclaimed. "Sybil was afraid of Aynesworth, I know. There was something which she was going to tell me, something which she will tell me."

"Rubbish!" Lucille replied. "She never meant to tell you, or if she did, it wasn't the whole truth that you were to hear. Those two quarreled in the billiard-room and Aynesworth was found shot. Who else in the whole world, do you suppose, could have done it? Is there a single person you can think of?"

"It may have been an accident!" Jermyn muttered.

"An accident! Well, let me go on," Lucille continued. "A quarter of an hour ago, Miss Sybil Cluley, in a blue serge traveling suit and carrying a dressing-case, stole out of her room. I found her on her way to the back stairs. If she does escape the fate she deserves," Lucille went on, "she has me to thank for it. I sent her back to her room pretty quickly. I never in my life knew anything so idiotic as an attempt to escape like that!"

"Do you mean that she was leaving the house?" Jermyn demanded.

"Absolutely!" Lucille replied. "She made no bones about it. She was terrified, she said, about being asked questions. I talked common sense with her and she was quick enough to realize what a fool she had been. She has changed back again into her dinner clothes. She is quite composed now and prepared to face the thing."

"I must go to her," Jermyn declared.

"Go, by all means, if you will," Lucille replied. "I am not trying to keep you apart. If you take my advice, though, you will say very little. I have talked to her for some time. She hasn't the least idea now of giving herself away. She will deny that there was the slightest disagreement between them. She does not know who shot him. She came away leaving him practicing cannons. I have impressed that upon her. That is the story she will tell."

"And how do you know that it is not the true one?" Jermyn asked.

Once more Lucille looked around the room. Then

she thrust her hand into the bosom of her gown and produced a small pistol.

"You had better take charge of this," she said. "I have been concealing it myself for the last half-hour but it is more your affair than mine. This was lying on the carpet in Sybil Cluley's room."

Jermyn took it from her almost mechanically.

"You found it where?"

"I found it exactly where I say — in Sybil Cluley's room," Lucille repeated. "Jermyn, try and be a man. Don't look so dumbfounded. Sybil Cluley may be everything you think she is but it is just as certain as that you and I are talking here that she shot Aynesworth. We both know what he was. He was a cad about women. He had been puzzling ever since she arrived about some memory. Well, it came to him, and whatever that memory was, it was the memory of something in her past life which affected her reputation. She knew all about it. Aynesworth wouldn't forget to rub it in. She was above making terms with him, without a doubt, but she saw the chance of losing you. Probably she lost her head. Why not? Frankly, I am sorry for her, Jermyn. I am sorry for her because I think that Aynesworth was probably brutally provoking. I want to save her. You must take my advice."

"What is it?"

"She will be asked questions. She will probably have to attend the inquest. She will come under a certain amount of suspicion, without a doubt. So long as that pistol is never produced and the stories of any disagreement between her and Aynesworth are kept quiet, she is in no more danger than any one of us. Don't agitate her. Don't put fresh ideas into her head — she

knows just what she has to say. And if you do see her, for Heaven's sake don't let her try to run away again!"

Jermyn walked to the window and stood there for several moments. Somewhere in the far distance he could hear a motor-car approaching. It was probably the police! He turned back to Lucille.

"If she did this," he cried hoarsely, "it must have been in a wild moment! She wasn't accountable — they can't make her accountable! She was terrified of Aynesworth all the time — no one could help seeing it."

"I agree with you absolutely," Lucille replied, "but we must remember that the law judges differently. It takes no account of provocation. We must. Don't disturb her now. If they ask her questions to-night, she knows exactly what she has to say. I'll do the best I can for her, Jermyn, for your sake, but let me tell you this — you are the only person whom I ever shall tell — I am going to put the fact absolutely out of my mind. Listen."

She paused for a moment. The motor-car was drawing nearer and there were footsteps in the hall, but the room in which they were was still empty.

"I saw Sybil Cluley with the pistol in her hand. I went along the lawn just as far as the billiard-room window just before Mr. Norden Smith came. I thought it was only a joke. Mind, no one else shall ever know that from me. After all, she is a woman and she must have been taunted almost to madness. Listen! Who's that? There's some one coming down the stairs."

They both listened intently. From where they stood they could just distinguish the sound of light, stealthy footsteps upon the smooth oak of the staircase, the

swish of a dress, footsteps that hesitated a little and yet came steadily on. Jermyn moved to the door and threw it wide open. They both stood upon the threshold, looking out. With her hand upon the banisters, peering half fearfully forward, only a few steps above them, stood Sybil.

CHAPTER XIII

Sybil descended the last few stairs with her head turned sideways, her eyes distended, unnaturally large, fixed upon Jermyn. When she reached the hall she seemed to steady herself. Then she came slowly towards the threshold of the library. For the moment Jermyn could do no more than look at her. She was wearing now the dress she had worn at dinner-time. He could see the place from which the rosette was missing. One or two of the roses were hanging limply from her brooch. She had the look of one who walks in her sleep.

"Sybil!" he cried softly.

She looked into his eyes and he shivered. There was some new thing there, something which seemed to raise a wall between them. She came slowly on, but the hands which he had held out fell to his side.

"Sybil!" he cried once more.

"This is horrible!" she whispered. "Let me come in. I am afraid to stay upstairs any longer."

She came slowly into the room. Jermyn closed the door after her.

"Sybil," he insisted hoarsely, "tell me the whole truth, the whole story — everything you know? I must understand exactly what you are going to say, before these men come to ask you questions."

She began to tremble. She opened her lips to speak but closed them again.

"Listen," Lucille said, "listen, both of you. This is a critical moment. In a very short time there may be people here before whom a single slip might mean irretrievable disaster. Sybil Cluley, remember that no one save I myself saw you trying to leave the house. I have forgotten it. You have put those clothes back in your trunk?"

"I have put them back," Sybil agreed, in a dull tone.

"Very good. Now listen to me intently. Remember you played that fifty up with Lord Lakenham. You finished the game. Your head ached. You made an excuse and left him. You went straight to your room. You meant to take some phenacetin and come down again. He was practicing cannons, which he had been trying to teach you, when you left. He was alone. You neither saw nor heard any one approaching the room."

Sybil began to tremble. She looked away from Jermyn.

"I neither saw nor heard any one approach," she repeated. "Lord Lakenham was alone when I left."

Lucille inclined her head.

"That is simple," she said. "There was no quarrel between you and Lord Lakenham, no disagreement of any sort."

"There was no quarrel," Sybil repeated.

"What we three know," Lucille went on, "about that little paragraph in the paper which recalled a certain incident to Lord Lakenham's mind, no one outside this room knows. We must all bear that in mind. There was no secret understanding between you and

Lord Lakenham. He was a stranger to you. You met him here for the first time."

"I met him here for the first time," Sybil repeated.

"You parted on good terms, you left him in good spirits. . . . Now, Jermyn, listen to me. You were with me out in the garden most of the time when Sybil was playing billiards with Lord Lakenham. You came straight from the garden into the bridge-room. Mr. Norden Smith found you there. You and he together went to the billiard-room. You had not previously entered it since dinner."

"I had not been near it since dinner," Jermyn repeated.

Sybil was standing with her eyes tightly closed. She was swaying a little on her feet. Jermyn almost pushed her into a chair and her head fell forward into her hands.

"You had not entered the billiard-room since dinner-time," Lucille said calmly. "You entered it for the first time with Mr. Norden Smith. You found Lord Lakenham lying there in his present condition. There were no signs of a struggle there; you saw no weapon — nothing. The affair is a complete mystery to you. That is all quite simple, is it not?"

"It is quite simple."

Lucille held her head for a moment.

"I do not think that there is anything which I have forgotten," she said. "You heard the front door bell? Those are the men from Norwich, I suppose. You had better let them ask anybody any questions they wish to. The great thing for us three to remember is this. We are in a state of mystification. We have no idea as to who shot Lord Lakenham. If he recovers and makes

a statement, that is a matter against which, of course, we cannot guard. Except for that we should be safe."

Sybil raised her head slowly and looked at Jermyn. She met the fiercely questioning look in his eyes without flinching.

"What, in God's name —" he began.

Lucille's arm shot out.

"Hush!" she whispered hoarsely. "Those men are in the hall. They will be shown in here. Hush!"

There was a tap at the door even as she spoke. The butler entered. He made his way to Jermyn.

"There is a police inspector here, sir," he announced in an undertone. "He wishes to have a few words with you, if it is quite convenient."

Jermyn nodded.

"I will come out," he said.

The two women were left alone. Lucille came over and stood by the side of Sybil.

"My dear Miss Cluley," she remarked dryly, "surely the training of your profession should stand you in better stead than this! Be agitated, if you like, but don't be tragical. Remember, if a suspicion is once planted, it quickly grows. It rests with you to see that it is not planted."

The police inspector was very civil and not in the least officious. Jermyn took him at once into the billiard-room and showed him as nearly as he could how Lakenham had been found.

"Nothing in the room," the inspector asked, "has been disturbed?"

"Nothing at all," Jermyn assured him.

"Nothing removed from the floor, for instance?"

"Nothing," Jermyn repeated.

The man went on his hands and knees and made a searching examination of the whole place.

"No weapon?" he inquired.

"I have not seen one," Jermyn replied.

The inspector locked up the apartment and put the key in his pocket.

"If quite convenient, Sir Jermyn," he said, "I should be glad to be taken upstairs to Lord Lakenham's bedroom. The doctor can then tell me if there is any chance of his lordship's being able to make a statement."

Jermyn accompanied the man upstairs. Lakenham had been taken into one of the large bedrooms in the east wing, which was approached through a spacious sitting-room. The doctor answered their soft tap at the door and stepped outside at once.

"This is Inspector Holmes from Norwich," Jermyn explained. "He is anxious just to have a word with you."

"I am bound to ask you at once," the inspector put it, "if there is any chance of Lord Lakenham being able to make a statement shortly?"

"I cannot say," the doctor answered. "He is alive but unconscious. The wound is an exceedingly dangerous one and his situation is critical. I am afraid an operation will be necessary within the next few hours, but from what I can gather of the patient's condition, I must confess that it is very doubtful whether he will survive it. I am expecting Dr. Fielden from Norwich in a very few minutes, but I am sure he will only confirm what I am telling you."

"Has his lordship spoken at all?" the inspector inquired.

"Not a word."

"Have any of his clothes been removed — his shirt, for instance?"

"I have put the shirt on one side for you," the doctor replied. "It is locked up in a chest of drawers here. You must excuse me now. I dare not leave my patient any longer."

He hurried back to the bedside. The inspector and Jermyn turned away.

"Lord Lakenham, I presume, had nothing on his mind?" the former asked. "He was not in the least likely to have committed suicide?"

Jermyn shook his head.

"The idea seems preposterous," he declared. "Lakenham was in excellent spirits all day. He was a man who thoroughly enjoyed life, he was wealthy, and, so far as I know, he had no troubles of any sort. His was not at all the sort of morbid disposition one associates with the victims of suicide."

"Who was the last person who saw him before he was shot?"

"Miss Cluley — Miss Sybil Cluley — the young lady who is engaged to be my wife," Jermyn answered slowly. "She was playing billiards with him, but she complained of a headache and left him as soon as the game was over."

"Could I have a few words with her?" the inspector suggested.

"Certainly," Jermyn assured him. "She is in the library now. Mr. Norden Smith, too, the gentleman who was with me when we discovered Lord Lakenham, is still here in case he is required. We shall find him, I think, in the smoking-room."

"He will do presently. I should like to speak to Miss Cluley first."

Jermyn led the way into the library. Sybil was sitting in the same easy-chair, in very much the same attitude. Lucille had apparently been standing with her elbow upon the mantelpiece, talking to her. Both women turned their heads as the two men entered.

"Sybil," Jermyn said, closing the door behind him, "I am sorry but the inspector wants to ask just one or two questions. I hope you won't mind?"

"No, I do not mind at all," she replied.

"It is my duty to make a report of this affair," the inspector explained, with a slight salute, "and any information you can give me I should be glad to have. At the same time, this is not a formal inquiry, and it is not in the least necessary that you answer any questions unless you care to."

Sybil's eyebrows were slowly raised. She seemed somehow to have completely recovered her self-possession.

"If I can be of any assistance, I am sure you are welcome to all the knowledge I possess of the affair."

The inspector bowed.

"As the last person who saw Lord Lakenham before he was shot, madame," he said, "your evidence will, of course, be of importance."

"All that I can tell you," Sybil continued, "seems very unimportant and I am afraid it will not help much. You can hear it now, or any one can hear it at any time they choose. I played billiards with Lord Lakenham after dinner, as I do not care for bridge. We had quite a cheerful game and Lord Lakenham was all the time in the highest spirits. We talked and laughed so much,

indeed, that when the game was over I had quite a bad headache, so I went up to my room, meaning to take some phenacetin and come down again. I left Lord Lakenham practicing cannons. That is all that I know about the matter."

"There was, then, no quarrel between you?"

"Quarrel?" Sybil repeated. "Lord Lakenham was much too gallant a man, I can assure you, to quarrel with a lady."

"There was no misunderstanding, or anything of that sort?"

"Miss Cluley is engaged to marry me," Jermyn intervened. "Her acquaintance with Lord Lakenham is of the slightest. She has known him, in fact, for barely twenty-four hours."

The inspector made a note or two in his book.

"For the sake of formality," he persisted, "I should like you to answer my question. I am taking it that there was nothing in the nature of a quarrel or disagreement between you and Lord Lakenham?"

"I have already assured you," Sybil repeated calmly, "that there was nothing of the sort."

"You played one game of billiards and after its completion went upstairs. A game of fifty or a hundred up?"

"A game of fifty up."

The inspector closed his book.

"If you would excuse me for one moment," he said, "I will return."

Jermyn moved forward.

"Shall I —"

"If you will allow me, sir, I will go alone," the inspector interrupted.

He crossed the hall and they heard him enter the billiard-room. In a moment or two he was back, having carefully locked the door behind him.

"You say, Miss Cluley, that you played Lord Lakenham a game of billiards, fifty up, and that you finished the game amicably and went upstairs. The score on the marking board at present is twenty-eight and thirty. How do you account for that if the game was finished and if it was a fifty up?"

Sybil looked straight into the man's eyes. There was a perceptible pause before she spoke. Jermyn felt his heart beating fast. Was she really thinking — thinking out her answer?

"Lord Lakenham agreed to give me twenty points," she said slowly. "We omitted to put them on at the commencement of the game. Therefore, when I had reached thirty I had won."

There was a brief silence in the room. Somehow, the cold preciseness of Sybil's answers was terrifying Jermyn. Perhaps, notwithstanding all that he felt for her, some such thought was in his mind as the inspector presently expressed.

"You are, I believe, an actress, madame?" the latter asked.

"That is my profession," she admitted.

"And I think I understood from Sir Jermyn Annerley that Lord Lakenham was a stranger to you when you met him here?"

"Entirely."

"He had said nothing during the evening which had led you to believe that he was in any sort of trouble or distress?"

"On the contrary," Sybil declared, "he seemed in

the highest of spirits. He grumbled because I would not play again, but directly he understood that my headache was really painful, he made no further attempt to keep me."

"Do you, Sir Jermyn, or you, Miss Cluley, or you, madame," the inspector continued, turning to Lucille, "know of any other person who did enter or could have entered the billiard-room between the time of Miss Cluley's leaving it and your discovery of this accident?"

They all replied in the negative. The inspector closed his book finally.

"I trust that my questions have not been offensive," he said, a little apologetically. "It is not my duty to enter upon a complete cross-examination. I have only to ask the obvious questions which might lead to the truth being discovered before any time has been allowed to intervene. Perhaps it would be as well now, Sir Jermyn, if I had a word with the gentleman who was with you when you entered the billiard-room."

"Shall you require to speak to these ladies again?" Jermyn inquired. "If not, I daresay they would be glad to retire."

"Certainly not, sir," the inspector replied. "I shall leave my two men here, if you will permit me, until I have reported this matter at headquarters, and it would perhaps be as well if no one left the house for more than a slight expedition, at the immediate present."

"There is no one, I am sure," Jermyn declared, "who proposes leaving it. If you will come this way, then."

The inspector turned towards Lucille and Sybil. He glanced at Lucille but it was Sybil upon whom his eyes rested.

"I am sorry to have had to trouble you, madame," he said. "I wish you good night."

Sybil looked at him unfalteringly. There was no smile upon her lips, but she inclined her head slightly.

"Good night!" she answered.

CHAPTER XIV

Once more the inspector and Jermyn crossed the hall and this time entered the smoking-room. Mr. Norden Smith, with a very large cigar in his mouth and a whisky-and-soda by his side, was lying stretched out upon one easy-chair with his legs in another. He rose with a little apology as the door opened.

"Say, I hope you'll forgive my making myself comfortable," he said to his host. "You told me to ring for anything I wanted. That affair gave me quite a nasty shock. Is there any change in his lordship's condition?"

"None at present," Jermyn answered. "I am very glad indeed that you have been looking after yourself. This," he added, turning to the inspector, "is Mr. Norden Smith. He had called to see Lord Lakenham and was shown into the library, where we were all playing bridge, by my butler. I took him to the billiard-room, with the result you know of."

"Did you notice any signs of a struggle, or any traces in the room of the recent presence of any other person, excepting, of course, Miss Cluley, sir?" the inspector asked.

Mr. Norden Smith shook his head negatively.

"There was nothing unusual whatever to be observed," he replied, "with the exception, of course, of

Lord Lakenham's position and condition. I may add," he went on, "that I am a criminal lawyer myself and have a quick eye for details. Directly I saw the brown rim round the bullet mark on the shirt, I decided that it was a case of suicide."

"May I inquire," the inspector proceeded, "the nature of your business with Lord Lakenham?"

"I hadn't any business with him at all," Mr. Norden Smith confessed. "He stayed with us in New York only a month or so ago. We entertained him once or twice, and when he heard that I was coming to England this summer he made me promise I'd look him up. Quite a good fellow, Lord Lakenham, and we enjoyed taking him round very much indeed. I happened to be spending the night at the inn here, and heard that he was staying with Sir Jermyn, so I telephoned over. Sir Jermyn was kind enough to ask me to dinner but I had some mail to look after, so I told him I'd come round afterwards."

"You say that you are staying at the inn," the inspector asked. "Isn't this rather an out-of-the-way place for a casual visitor?"

"I am on a motoring tour, doing all the cathedral cities of England," Mr. Norden Smith explained. "Ecclesiastical architecture is a bit of a hobby with me. I've done the west coast. I was at Norwich this morning and I meant to get as far as Lynn to-night. I had bad tire trouble all the way from Norwich here and finally I got sick of it. The Annerley Arms looked very comfortable, so I put up there and set my man to work to put on new covers. I am on my way to Lincoln and Durham."

"Did I understand, Sir Jermyn," the inspector in-

quired, "that Mr. Norden Smith was shown into the library by your butler?"

"That is so," Jermyn assented.

"The same servant who admitted Mr. Norden Smith at the front door?"

"I believe so," Jermyn replied. "Such would naturally be the case. It is quite easy to find out."

"The matter would be finished up," the inspector said apologetically, "if I might just ask the question."

Jermyn rang the bell. The butler himself answered the summons.

"Roberts,—" Jermyn began.

The inspector intervened.

"Will you allow me, sir? It is quite an unimportant question but it is more in order for me to ask it myself. Your name is Roberts?"

"Yes, sir!"

"You showed this gentleman into the bridge-room this evening. Did you also admit him at the front door?"

"Yes, sir!"

"He asked for Lord Lakenham?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Did you know that Lord Lakenham was in the billiard-room?"

"I believed that he was, sir," the butler replied, "because I had served coffee there. In any case, though, it seemed more in order to show the gentleman first into the room where Sir Jermyn was."

"And so you took him there direct from the front door?"

"Certainly, sir."

The inspector nodded.

"That is all that I wish to know from you. By the way, though, you say that you served coffee in the billiard-room?"

"Yes, sir!"

"To Lord Lakenham and Miss Cluley?"

"Yes, sir! His lordship also took a liqueur brandy."

"They were alone at the time?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Playing billiards?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Did they seem interested in the game?"

"Certainly, sir. His lordship was showing Miss Cluley how to hold the rest when I entered. I had to wait with the coffee tray until she had finished her stroke."

Once more the inspector closed his book, and obeying a gesture from his master Roberts disappeared.

"It will not be necessary for you to interrupt your journey, sir," the inspector remarked, turning to Mr. Norden Smith. "If you will permit me, though," he added, turning to Jermyn, "in case the ladies should not have retired I should rather like to ask Miss Cluley one more question."

Jermyn frowned a little impatiently.

"If you are quite sure that it is essential," he said. "You can understand, I am sure, how terribly upset Miss Cluley naturally is."

"It is simply," the inspector explained, "with a view to making things easier later on. It is a subject I should have alluded to before but I must confess that it slipped my memory."

Jermyn led him back once more into the library. Lucille and Sybil were still there. At the opening of the door they both started. Jermyn hurried over to Sybil's side and drew her hand through his arm.

"It is too bad to worry you, I know, dear," he said, "but the inspector wishes to ask one more question. Perhaps it is just as well for him to get them over. It is something which he had forgotten."

"I wish to ask," the inspector interposed, "whether you, Miss Cluley, had seen Lord Lakenham in possession of any sort of a pistol during the evening?"

She shook her head.

"Most certainly not."

"Do you possess a pistol yourself?"

"Yes!"

The inspector looked up quickly.

"May I ask where it is?"

She smiled faintly.

"It is among my properties at the Imperial Theatre," she replied, distinctly. "It has never had any cartridges, nor am I sure that I know how to use it."

"You haven't it with you here, then?" the inspector persisted.

"Didn't I make that clear?" she asked. "So far as I know, it has never been out of my dressing-room in the Imperial Theatre. It was most certainly there when I left London. It is certainly there now."

The inspector saluted the two ladies.

"Then it is very certain, madam," he declared, "that it is of no interest to us in our present investigation. I am sorry to have had to trouble you again. I wish you both good night."

Jermyn led him out into the hall.

"This is a very extraordinary affair, sir," the man remarked. "May I ask a question which you may perhaps think a little unwarranted at the present juncture?"

"You may ask anything you like," Jermyn answered.

"Do you know any one in this house, sir, who has any cause for enmity against his lordship?"

"Absolutely no one," Jermyn replied. "Lakenham was an easy-going, good-natured sort of fellow, without violent likes or dislikes, a man who was quite content, too, to lead the ordinary life of pleasure. I can't conceive why he should have had an enemy, and I can't think it possible that he could have had one under this roof."

"I trust that you will not take exception to any arrangements which I feel it to be my duty to make," the inspector continued. "You see, the circumstances of this case are very peculiar. Suicide seems a strange theory in any case, and the fact that no weapon was discovered by the side of the body seems to dispose of that theory altogether. I am compelled, therefore, to regard it as a case of murder."

Jermyn shivered a little. It was a hackneyed word enough, but in his own house, concerning his own kinsman, with those whom he loved so closely involved, it seemed to possess a new and more hideous significance.

"I am now," the inspector went on, "going to make a thorough search of the apartment and of the gardens outside. I prefer to do this by myself. I shall then return to Norwich and make my report. I am compelled to leave one of my men upstairs, in or near the

apartment where Lord Lakenham is lying. The other one I must leave in the billiard-room. You will understand, I am sure, the necessity for such steps."

"I am quite convinced, Mr. Inspector," Jermyn replied, "that you will do what you conceive to be your duty. Our only concern must be to help you in every possible way. If you will ring the bell as soon as you have finished your examination of the billiard-room, Roberts will be glad to bring you any refreshments you may care for."

"I am much obliged, sir."

"And if you do discover anything," Jermyn continued, suggestively,—

"If I should make any discoveries, or come upon anything likely to indicate a clew," the inspector intervened, "I am afraid that at this stage of the proceedings I must keep it entirely to myself. The chief constable will probably be over to-morrow morning early, sir, and I am sure he will be glad to discuss the matter with you. Good night, sir!"

Jermyn hurried back to the library. Lucille was there alone.

"Where is Sybil?" he asked quickly.

"She has gone to her room," Lucille replied, coming to his side and drawing her arm through his. "Jermyn dear, you must sit down and rest for a little time. I have told Roberts to put the decanters on the sideboard. Please give me something to drink and help yourself."

Jermyn seemed scarcely to hear her.

"Gone to her room!" he repeated. "I want to speak to her. I must speak to her. I can't bear this any longer. I am going to hold her hands and

pull that wall down. She is going to tell me everything and I am going to tell her that whatever she did was right."

She forced him into a chair and sat at his feet.

"Jermyn dear," she insisted, "you must please be guided by me for a very short time. You are not yourself when you talk like that. Sybil went through her examination beautifully. You and I between us will keep any harm away from her, but we can only succeed if you keep down those wild impulses of yours and act like a rational human being. There is plenty of time in the future for understandings. For the next few days, what we have to do is to keep her safe."

Jermyn sprang suddenly to his feet.

"This is all sophistry!" he cried. "The truth is always best. I shall go to her now. I don't care what the result may be. If she killed Aynesworth, she did it in self-defense. The fellow had drunk too much wine. He had probably insulted her. It served him right. It would be better for her, even now, to tell the truth and have done with it, better to face her trial and what may happen to her, than that she should carry this load about with her all her life. I will go to her room. I will make her talk with me at once."

Already he was on his way towards the door.

"Stop!" Lucille called out.

There was a quality in her voice which commanded his attention. He turned unwillingly around.

"A single word of what you have said overheard by that man in the billiard-room," Lucille said softly, "would mean, what do you think — for Sybil? It would mean an ignominious and awful death. Don't look at me as though I were mad. Be a man, Jermyn,

and face facts. Sybil killed Aynesworth not in self-defense but because he threatened to disclose a little chapter of her past which she feared would have ended her relations with you. That is the honest, the absolute truth. Very likely she only meant to frighten him. Certainly it was only an impulse. But she killed him. It is hard for you to realize it to-night, but as the days go on you will know it and understand. If you go to her now, she is half distraught, she will listen to what you have to say; she is ready to take any advice. She will go downstairs to that man. She will say — 'It is true. I killed Lord Lakenham. He threatened to take a mean advantage of certain knowledge which he possessed. I meant to frighten him into silence. I lost my temper. I pulled the trigger of that pistol. It was such a little thing. I never dreamed that it would kill him!' To her she may seem to be justifying herself. Before her own conscience she may seem justified. To you and to me, even, she may seem justified. But the law will not think so. The law will hang her! . . . Be careful, Jermyn. If you do a rash thing to-night, you may spend the rest of your life regretting it."

The impulse died away. Lucille's words seemed to burn themselves into his brain. He came back into the room. She stole softly to his side.

"Jermyn," she whispered, "be brave, dear. She shall be saved. For your sake, I will save her."

CHAPTER XV

Up in the skies, the stars which had made the summer night so brilliant were beginning to pale, to fade away in a nebulous and airy waste. The deep yellow glow was passing from the face of the moon. Jermyn, who was standing motionless behind a thick clump of laurel bushes, turned his head and gazed eastwards. Surely those terrible hours must soon pass! As yet, however, there was no break in the clouds. The great white house with its rows of dead windows seemed itself to have borrowed from the solemnity and mystery of the passing moments. Forty silent, unblinking eyes gazed out upon a world of opalescent hues and shadows.

One, two, three, four! The brazen notes of the stable clock seemed like an incongruous note from some alien world. Jermyn, from behind his ambush of laurel bushes, stiffened suddenly and leaned forward. His eyes were fixed upon a certain window, Sybil's window, the fourth from the left on the second story of the house. He was all the time expecting something, yet expecting it with a sense of excitement which in that strange solitude he took no pains to conceal. A thrush hopped out on to the dew-soaked lawn, a faint breeze rustled among the leaves of the trees; the deathly silence was broken. And almost simultaneously the still monotony of those rows of windows was

changed. A faint light glimmered in the one which he was watching. It was moving about in the room. It proceeded obviously from some one carrying a candle. Jermyn waited only for a few seconds and then deserted his post with swift and silent footsteps. He threaded the narrow path which ran through the back of the shrubberies and pursued it until he reached the side of the house. There he came once more to a standstill. As before, it was one window only which he watched — the third from the left, the window of the anteroom adjoining Lord Lakenham's bedchamber. When he arrived there, it was as all the others in the front, blank and lifeless, in almost startling contrast to the steady glow from the windows of the bedchamber itself. Jermyn stood there waiting and almost holding his breath. The seconds dragged by, tearing at his nerves with an actual and physical pain. Then he saw the thing for which he had been waiting. The light from Sybil's room was repeated in the window which he was watching. It gleamed there only for a moment. Some one had passed by the window, holding a candle.

His vigil was over. Keeping still in the shadow of the house, Jermyn walked along a narrow margin of turf for some dozen yards or so. Then he stopped short, pushed back the windows of his library and stepped in. He turned up with steady fingers the lamp, which had been burning low. It seemed to him that his last faint hope had passed. Sybil had gone to the rooms of the dying man to plead for her life! Even in the face of the tragedy which was beating itself out through the slow seconds of the night, he found himself tortured with maddening thoughts of

the secret which the dying man was to carry with him to the grave.

The seconds ticked on into minutes. After the tenseness of the last few hours, a curious inertness seemed to have seized upon Jermyn. He stood upon the threshold of the open windows and looked out once more into the gardens. Already, since he had left, there were signs of a change. The thrushes were beginning to sing, a faint blue coloring hung over the tree-tops. In the east there was a glimmering line of rose-pink merging into mauve. All manners of birds were twittering in the shrubbery; a breath of wind brought him a delicious wave of perfume from the rose gardens. Jermyn sighed as he turned away. It was, without doubt, a beautiful world.

Once more the stable clock clanged out. Jermyn fastened the windows of his room and turned out the lamp. Then he slowly opened the door and crossed the hall. A light had been left burning there but it was almost out. The place seemed full of unseen spaces and the great staircase was only dimly visible. Very slowly Jermyn ascended.

He reached the second landing and turned to the right, making his way down a broad corridor. On either side of him were closed doors; everywhere around, the mysterious silence of sleep. A former master of the house had collected statuary, and from several of the small recesses in the walls, the white, chiseled faces gleamed down upon him. Noiselessly he passed on. About half-way down the corridor was a turning to the left, and as he neared it he became conscious of a little current of air. He moved even more cautiously. He came at last to a complete standstill. There was

a short passage, a window which stood wide open, and a small balcony. On the balcony Lucille was standing.

For several seconds he remained motionless. She stood with her back to him, looking out over the gardens, looking towards the laurel bushes behind which he had spent a portion of the night. Jermyn made no sound, even his breathing was almost inaudible, yet Lucille, seemingly conscious of his presence, slowly turned her head. In that strange light before the dawn her face seemed paler than ever, paler, even, than those marble statues. There was life only in the distended eyes and the parted lips.

"You!" she whispered.

He moved slowly towards her. He stood by her side upon the little stone balcony.

"Yes, it is I, Lucille," he said. "Listen!"

He caught her disengaged hand; the other was gripping the rail of the balcony. For a few seconds they stood so, their faces turned towards the main corridor. There was no sound to be heard. Lucille sighed. Already her first terror seemed to be passing.

"You have not been to bed," she murmured, glancing at his attire.

"How could one sleep," he answered, "on such a night!"

She looked down at the dew upon his patent shoes and at the splashes of wet upon his coat.

"You have been out!" she explained.

"In the gardens only."

"Watching?"

He shrugged his shoulders. His face was utterly expressionless.

"What should I watch for?" he muttered. "Is there anything which we do not know?"

She leaned forward and looked along the front of the house. She looked at the window which was fourth from the end. It was within a few yards of them. There was something significant in her look, but after his first shivering apprehension of it he turned his head and gazed away over the tree-tops.

"The dawn comes," he reminded her. "Soon the servants will be astir."

She drew her rose-colored dressing-gown a little closer around her.

"You are right," she said; "I must go. I could not sleep — the whole thing is too awful. I am not sure, Jermyn, whether I am doing right."

"What do you mean?" he asked, hoarsely.

She held up her finger. They both of them seemed transformed into the likeness of stone images. Their faces were turned towards the corridor. The woman's hand gripped the rail of the balcony more tightly than ever. Without a doubt, the sound which they both heard was the sound of soft footsteps and the trailing of a light gown. Almost they held their breaths. The footsteps came nearer and nearer. Without turning her head, Sybil passed along the corridor, Sybil in a long white dressing-gown, her fair hair bound up with white ribbon. She was gone in a moment. She passed without looking to the right or to the left, without any consciousness of the man and woman who watched. The sound of her footsteps ceased. The door of her room was softly opened and closed. Lucille shrugged her shoulders very slightly. She gazed into her companion's face.

"You knew that she had been to him?" she whispered.

"I knew!"

"You watched from the gardens?"

He pointed below.

"I was behind those laurel bushes for more than two hours," he said. "I saw the light in her window; I saw it again flash as she passed through the anteroom."

"One cannot help but pity her," Lucille murmured. "Think of the agony of her night! It was her one hope — she went to plead for his silence. If he recovers consciousness, Jermyn, do you believe that he will tell the truth before he dies?"

"I do not know," he answered. "How could any one tell what a man in his state would do?"

Lucille drew her dressing-gown around her and shivered. The sky in the east was red now and the dew lay upon the lawns like frost. In the woods which stretched away from the house, the thrushes were singing. The stable clock clanged again.

"It is morning," he said.

She laid her fingers upon his arm. Her face was very close to his. Her expression had softened. In this strange, ghostly light she was beautiful in a weird, witchlike way of her own.

"What are you going to do about Sybil in the future?" she demanded, under her breath. "I ask you because I must know."

Again he shook his head.

"For two hours last night, in my study," he said slowly, "I asked myself that question. Down there among the laurel bushes I watched the moon rise above the trees and I saw it grow pale, and I asked myself

nothing but that one question. I do not know — indeed, Lucille, I do not know."

She took his arm. Together they looked out upon this strange, fantastic world of trees and shadows, of landscape hung with a mauve light.

"Do you remember," she whispered, "when we were motoring in the Black Forest in August, you and I and my mother? You drove all through the night to avoid the heat, and she slept. It was something like this. We had first the moonlight and then the spectral light, the lavender and gray twilight. There was just this same chilly feeling before the sunrise. I asked you a question then."

"I remember," he answered, uneasily.

"It is when the world sleeps that one can think," she went on. "Can't you feel it? When every one is laughing and talking and breathing the air around us, it seems almost impossible to see things clearly. It is in these long, still hours that one sees the truth. I, too, have been sleepless to-night, Jermyn; I, too, have been thinking. Some of my impulses have grown weak. Second thoughts have come to me."

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

She turned and pointed down the corridor.

"I have been asking myself," she said, "what there is that I owe to that girl or to you that I should perjure myself to drive her into your arms? Why should I shield her? Answer me that. She has killed a man. Whether she had justification or not matters nothing to me. Let the courts decide that. I hate her! Now tell me, Jermyn — answer me honestly — why should I shield her?"

"Because you are both women," he answered, "be-

cause you know that I love her, because it is splendid of you."

She laughed very softly but it was a laugh which made Jermyn shiver.

"Jermyn," she said, "go back again to that night I spoke of in the Black Forest. I asked you a question then. You were not very kind to me but I — I have never changed."

"Lucille!" he begged.

"Hush! These are the hours in which one speaks the truth. Plenty of men have told me that they cared, Jermyn, plenty of men whom the world in which I live might find more attractive than you. And I wanted you. I always have wanted you. It's the tiger in me, I suppose, to want what I do want to the death. I have only to speak the truth and there is no chance in this world that you and she will ever stand hand in hand again. Why should I not speak it? Or —"

"Or what?"

"Or if I keep silent, why should I not exact my price?"

"Lucille, you are talking wildly," he declared. "You have been so splendid, so brave, so helpful. You could not go back upon your words!"

"But indeed I could," she told him. "Now listen, Jermyn. I am going to my room. At seven o'clock you must come to me. By that time I shall have made up my mind. Only — hush, not a word now. I have finished. Dear, how cold and pale you are!"

She took his face suddenly between her hands and kissed him on the lips. Then she passed noiselessly away. He waited until he heard the door of her room open and close. Then he retraced his steps along the

corridor, turned to the left and paused before a door in the east wing. It was the room at which he had gazed from below — the third window on the left. Very slowly he turned the handle of the door and entered.

CHAPTER XVI

The room through which Jermyn passed was dark and empty, but in the chamber beyond, the best in the house, as became the pomp and circumstance of his position, Henry Aynesworth, Marquis of Lakenham, lay dying. Jermyn, who was admitted only after he had knocked softly twice, stood for a moment upon the threshold of this fateful apartment. The surgeon from Norwich had arrived and was talking in earnest whispers with Dr. Brownrigg. A nurse whom he had brought with him sat by the bedside. The man who lay there seemed to have turned his face to the wall. He was either still unconscious or he slept. There was no sound in the room save the faint murmur of voices as the two physicians talked together. Jermyn came slowly over towards them. They moved a little apart at his entrance.

"There is no change?" Jermyn asked.

"None," Dr. Brownrigg replied. "Physically, there will be none until the end."

"He must die, then?"

"He must certainly die."

"Has he spoken to any one?"

The two doctors exchanged glances. It was Dr. Brownrigg who answered.

"He has spoken to no one, Sir Jermyn," he said. "Miss Cluley has been here, begging to be allowed to

sit by his bedside, but the inspector exacted a promise from me that if he refrained from putting a man in the room, I should allow no one to enter it save myself and the necessary attendants. I hope you will explain to Miss Cluley, Sir Jermyn, that I was compelled to keep my word."

"I quite understand," Jermyn replied, "and I am sure Miss Cluley will. Naturally, she feels the shock very much. She told me that she hoped to be allowed to see him before the end."

The doctor bowed.

"The young lady was in great distress," he said, "and it was very painful for me to have to refuse her request. Under the circumstances, however, there was no alternative."

"I am sure she will understand," Jermyn declared. "There is nothing more, I suppose," he added, with a hesitating glance toward the bed, "that can be done?"

"Nothing," the surgeon answered. "We have eased his pain — we could do no more. He may live for a few hours, but he will grow weaker all the time."

"No longer than that?" Jermyn murmured.

"No longer than that," the surgeon reiterated.

A slight sound came from the bed. Jermyn turned his head. The man who lay there had opened his eyes and was watching. The nurse was bending over him.

"I think," she said, turning round, "that he wants to speak to you, sir."

Jermyn made his way slowly to the bedside. His heart was thumping. They were all listening. Perhaps this was a foolish thing which he had done! The man who lay there was pitifully changed. He had been

a coarse, burly, red-faced giant a few hours ago. Now he seemed to have shrunken. His cheeks had fallen in, his eyes under his hairy eyebrows seemed to have become almost fixed in a glassy stare. His voice, loud and stentorian, the voice which Jermyn had hated, was almost a whisper, yet even as a whisper it seemed to preserve its discordant effect.

"I'm done, Jermyn!"

"Not a bit of it," Jermyn declared, with hastily assumed cheerfulness. "Nothing is certain, nowadays. A specialist is on his way here. We are hoping that he will be able to do something for you."

"I tell you I'm done," the man on the bed repeated, almost sullenly. "I know. Men always know when they're dying."

"We don't believe it," Jermyn asserted. "Still, if there is any one you would wish to see —"

"Not a soul," Lakenham muttered. "There's no one — who'll care a damn, there's no one I care — a damn about! I used — to think you were a fool, Jermyn — to keep the women at arm's length. I believe — you're right. They're devils!"

Jermyn looked half wildly around. The doctors were both standing within earshot. What was the man about to say!

"Don't talk if it distresses you," Jermyn begged. "There will be more chance for you if you lie still."

Lakenham opened his lips and closed them again. The nurse bent over him and wiped his forehead. Jermyn motioned her nervously away. He pointed to the corner of the room. She obeyed him with a significant glance towards the doctor.

"I can't — make up my mind," Lakenham went on,

painfully, "whether — to tell the truth — or not. The doctors have been pressing me hard. While — I lay here dozing, I heard them speak — of the police. You don't want — the police in the house — do you, Jermyn?"

"Nothing of that sort matters very much," Jermyn replied calmly. "If their coming is a necessity, I am prepared to accept it. I wish you would keep quiet now. I am sure it would be better for you."

The dying man opened and closed the fingers of his hand, which lay upon the coverlet. His eyes were fixed upon the ceiling.

"I can't make up — my mind. Women are — devils!"

He closed his eyes. One of the doctors approached the bedside. He waved Jermyn away.

"You had better leave him now," he whispered.

"He wants to tell me something!" Jermyn exclaimed hoarsely. "I don't think that I had better go away. He would rather tell me than any one. He is going to tell us who shot him!"

The doctor shook his head gravely.

"There is no question about his telling anybody anything more," he said. "Lord Lakenham is passing away. He will never open his lips again."

CHAPTER XVII

Perhaps, in its way, the final shock of Lakenham's death brought with it a certain grim sense of relief; an end, at any rate, of the terrible tension of the last few hours. Jermyn made his way unsteadily into his own bedroom and threw himself upon the sofa. For an hour or so he dozed. At six o'clock a servant brought him some tea. Afterwards, mechanically he took a bath and changed his clothes. At seven o'clock, he knocked at the door of the sitting-room of Lucille's little suite. Her maid admitted him at once. Lucille herself, fully dressed in plain dark clothes, was sitting at her table, writing letters. Her eyes followed the disappearing figure of the maid. As soon as the door was closed, she leaned towards Jermyn.

"It is all over, then?" she whispered. "He is dead?"

"He is dead!"

She drew a little breath. Her tone was unsteady.

"Has he told the truth?" she asked eagerly. "Is any one implicated? Did he say anything to you?"

Jermyn shook his head.

"He has made no statement at all," he replied. "He spoke to me. He was hesitating as to how much he should tell. Even as he was hesitating, he died."

"You are sure that he told the doctors nothing while you were out of the room?"

"I am quite sure."

Lucille sat for a few minutes with her eyes half closed. Her lips moved even as though she were speaking to herself. Then she drew a long sigh and rose to her feet. She went over to Jermyn and, passing her arm through his, led him to an easy-chair. A coffee tray stood upon the table.

"Jermyn dear," she said, "I want you to try and pull yourself together. I know that this has all been very horrible. You have had two shocks — the tragedy of poor Aynesworth's death under your own roof, and the tragedy of that terrible secret. You will have to be a man and face it, Jermyn. There is no other way. We shall need all our courage, both you and I, if that secret is to be properly kept."

He lifted his eyes to hers. There were black rims underneath them and his cheeks seemed to have become hollower. The shock had aged him.

"I shall face it," he assured her. "There is no doubt about that. The question which concerns me most for the present is what you are going to do!"

She busied herself, for a moment, making some coffee. Then she turned and looked at him steadfastly.

"Jermyn," she said, "all the excitement of the last few hours seems to have left me nerveless. I can talk quite calmly now of things which, in themselves, sound terrible. I am going to make a bargain with you."

"Well?"

"I am going to speak the naked truth," she went on. "Some of the things I shall say you may not like. Nevertheless, listen patiently. I have no love for Sybil Cluley. You are an idealist, Jermyn, and all

your days you will be a little out of touch with a world which has been fashioned by practical people, and whose main roads and by-ways lead to the obvious places. Sybil Cluley is just a little girl upon the stage, who has been clever enough to behave decently most of her days, and woman enough, when one of her secrets has been found out, to strike hard for herself and her future. She isn't what you think her, Jermyn. She isn't anything at all wonderful. She would have made you a good little wife, I daresay, and probably she would have settled down here quite contentedly. She might even have been faithful to you. But beyond that she wasn't in the least like the woman you ought to marry."

"I am listening patiently," he remarked, "but I do not agree with a single word. The woman whom a man ought to marry is the woman who, in some mysterious way, has made for herself a place which no other woman could make in the heart of the man who covets her. There is no universal standard of suitability — you must know that yourself very well — or all men would desire the same woman. I feel for Sybil what I have felt for no one else in my life, what I shall never feel for any other woman. I cannot listen to a single word against her. I do not believe a single word against her!"

She leaned a little forward.

"You believe — in your heart you know that she killed Aynesworth," she declared firmly.

Jermyn opened his lips and closed them again. She leaned a little closer still.

"I am not sure, even," she went on, watching him closely, "that Aynesworth, if he spoke to you at all,

did not let fall some word; did not, directly or indirectly, confirm this."

Jermyn covered his face with his hands. A sudden light flashed in Lucille's eyes. When Jermyn looked up he seemed older.

"Lucille," he said, "is this worth while between you and me? Since you force me to it, then, supposing I admit that Sybil did kill him? It was done in an impulse of madness. You do not for a moment suppose that I shall not protect her with all my power, by every means I possess?"

"Nothing that you can do," she replied, "will be of any use if I choose to speak out."

"But you won't!"

"On certain terms I shall not," she assented. "If you refuse my terms, I shall tell the truth."

He looked at her doubtfully, still without complete understanding.

"An hour or so ago," she continued, dropping her voice a little, "something in the coming of the morning from behind the woods carried me back to the past so overwhelmingly that I was compelled to speak to you of a moment which I have thought of always in my heart with shame. I mean the moment when I begged for a little of your love. No, don't move away. This hurts you to listen to, perhaps, but you must listen. When you told me that you were going to marry Sybil Cluley, you gave me the cruellest shock of my life. There was nothing left for me. I am not one of those who can distribute affection, Jermyn. When I love as I love you, as God knows I love you, there can be no other man in the world, there can be no life worth living without you, there can be nothing but

misery. Sit still. You must hear me to the end. Twenty-four hours ago it was all over with me. I couldn't even make up my mind what I should do with the wretched fragments of my life. I simply didn't care. Wherever I looked, I could see no single ray of joy or happiness, or anything approaching it. The one thing which alone I desired, hopeless as it seemed then, was to separate you and Sybil Cluley. Fate has done that for me."

He moved uneasily in his chair. She held out her hand.

"I know what you are thinking," she went on. "I have brought you face to face with your own problem. You are wondering and wondering. Now, listen. I am going to solve that problem for you. I am going to give you no chance of marrying a murderess. I am going to give you no chance of heroism. If you want to save this girl from the scaffold, you must marry me and marry me quickly."

He sprang to his feet.

"Lucille!" he cried. "Lucille!"

She rose slowly. She looked at him, looked at him long and steadily, and his heart sank. Then she continued.

"That is the price of my silence," she told him, deliberately. "I have no liking, no sympathy, for Sybil Cluley. If I am compelled to speak, she will very likely escape the death sentence. She might make a jury believe that she killed Aynesworth in defense of her honor. She is clever enough, I daresay. But even if she is fortunate, she will spend the best years of her youth in prison. I think, Jermyn, that you will save her from that."

It was significant of the conviction which her words carried, that Jermyn attempted no argument.

"You are cruel!" he muttered.

"I may seem so," she replied, "but I am not. I am sacrificing no one and I am doing what every woman in the world has a right to do; I am striking one blow for the thing which I desire more than anything else in life. And, Jermyn, I shall make you happy. You may not think so now but I shall. There is more love for you, more understanding of you, more real sympathy with you, in a single beat of my heart than in any of the false words which that little pale-faced chit has ever hammered out to an audience of one. Go to the window, Jermyn. You see? There is a motor-car coming up the avenue."

He followed her finger.

"What of it?"

"Who is in it?" she asked.

"There is a policeman on the box," he answered slowly. "Inside — yes, it's Lisgood — Captain Lisgood."

"The chief constable of Norfolk," she remarked. "Very well, you have just as long to make up your mind, Jermyn, as it takes that motor-car to deposit its passengers inside this house. As I live, I will send Sybil Cluley to take her trial on the charge of murdering Aynesworth, unless you give me now your hand in mine and your word of honor to marry me within two months. Hesitate, if you like, but every second means a risk. If they come before you have answered me, then I strike."

"I accept," Jermyn agreed swiftly. "I will marry you — I promise no more than that, mind — but I

will marry you if those are your terms. Remember that Sybil is to be spared not only the worst, but every breath of suspicion or annoyance, so far as lies in your power."

"She shall be saved from everything," Lucille declared,—"from everything."

There was a moment's silence. Jermyn had turned half away. Suddenly Lucille moved a little closer towards him. Her voice, her tone, even her bearing, were suddenly different. Her face seemed younger; her eyes were shining.

"Jermyn," she whispered, "some day or other, believe me, I shall be able to make you forget this morning. It is only because you are a little mad that I have ventured what I have ventured. If I had believed in your love for her, or her love for you, believed in it whole-heartedly, I would have saved her for you — indeed I would. I'd have been just like one of that other poor army of fools, who cut out their own happiness from their heart for the sake of the man they love. But it wouldn't have been of any use, Jermyn. If this all seems theatrical to you, and foolish, and wicked, try and believe that it is only because the circumstances themselves are so wonderful. We will save little Sybil Cluley and she shall go back to the profession which she loves, and I am quite sure that presently she'll settle down happily enough. She can have all the money or the social recognition she wants. We'll make it up to her. And, Jermyn, even if you don't believe it now, I shall teach you to forget her, dear. I shall teach you to feel in your heart that there was a Providence even in this terrible happening."

She had come quite close to him now. Her head

was lifted to his, her beautiful eyes were seeking to draw some answering light; her lips were a little parted, her breath almost was upon his cheek. He caught her hands and held them in a grip of iron, but he held her from him.

"Lucille," he said, "I have accepted your bargain. Don't misunderstand my acceptance. I have listened without protest to all that you have said about Sybil, but to me she is the one woman in the world. I have lived a life of which such men as Lakenham make sport. I am one of those primitive fools who only believe in loving once. I never cared for any one before I cared for Sybil; I have never told a woman that I cared for her; I don't believe that I have ever looked at a woman as though I cared for her. I gave Sybil my whole heart and she will have it until the end. I shall marry you to save her from the shadow of disgrace. I can't see that you'll get much out of it. I promise nothing beyond the bare fulfillment of that compact."

She raised his hands to her lips.

"They are looking for you downstairs," she murmured.

CHAPTER XVIII

"I call it perfectly horrid," Mary declared, as she linked her arm through Jermyn's. "We were having such a lovely time here. I don't want to go a bit."

Jermyn looked down at her pityingly.

"You poor child," he murmured. "It really is hard luck on you. We were going to have such a good time, weren't we?"

"Wonderful!" she sighed. "Sybil is most frightfully upset," she continued, confidentially. "I never saw her look so white and cold and quiet. I don't think she slept at all last night, for several times when I woke up I looked across the room, and I could see her eyes wide open. Was Lord Lakenham a very great friend of hers, Jermyn?"

He shook his head.

"No, it wasn't that at all, Mary," he said. "Sybil scarcely knew him. She happened, though, to be the last person who saw him before it happened and so I suppose she felt the shock."

The child dropped her voice. Although in a much lesser degree, the horror, too, was in her blood.

"Jermyn," she asked anxiously, "do they know yet who killed him?"

He looked away from her out of the old-fashioned walled garden in which they were walking, out across the meadows up to the tree-topped hills. The insects

were droning about them, the lightest of summer breezes was playing amongst the trees. It seemed to him that he could hear nothing, think of nothing, but those few fateful words — "*Willful murder against some person or persons unknown!*"

"No, dear," he answered, "they really don't know anything about it at all yet. I think that it must have been an accident. He probably had the pistol in his pocket, took it out to look at it, and it went off. We won't talk any more about it. It is too terrible to discuss."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"I was having such a lovely holiday and so was Sybil," she went on. "Sybil has been working so hard and since she came here she seems to have changed. The day before yesterday she was just like she used to be, so happy that she was even singing in her room, singing as she undressed and singing when she got up in the morning. And now she almost frightens me, she seems so grave and serious. Jermyn, please, you haven't quarreled, have you?"

"Not in the least, dear," he assured her. "Why should we quarrel? Didn't I send you upstairs just now to beg her to come down?"

Mary nodded doubtfully.

"Yes, and that is one thing I didn't understand," she replied. "I am quite sure Sybil could have come if she had liked. There are two maids up there wanting to help her pack and everything was nearly finished hours ago."

"Tell me what she said exactly?" Jermyn asked.

"She said she would be down in about half-an-hour. The Duchess was up there with her. Is it very horrid

of me, Jermyn, not to like the Duchess? I suppose she is a very grand lady, but she frightens me."

"I am afraid our likes and our dislikes," Jermyn replied, "are rather beyond our control."

"Here comes Mr. Norden Smith!" Mary exclaimed. "Isn't he funny, Jermyn! He told me such droll stories at luncheon-time. I think I like Americans."

Mr. Norden Smith was in motoring attire. He removed his goggles and took off his glove.

"I couldn't leave the neighborhood," he explained, "without looking in once more to say good-by. I am exceedingly sorry, Sir Jermyn, that I should have blundered in upon you at such an unfortunate time. I am off now to Lincoln to-day and up to Durham to-morrow. There's nothing more I can do, eh?"

"Nothing," Jermyn assured him. "Thank you all the same. I am much obliged to you for attending the inquest. It was rather hard luck on you to have to stay in the neighborhood an extra day when you have so little time to spare on this side."

"A matter of no consequence at all," Mr. Norden Smith declared; "absolutely of no consequence. To tell you the truth, the affair interested me professionally. I have never seen anything of the sort over here."

He fell into step and strolled along with them. Jermyn turned to Mary.

"Mary, don't you think," he suggested, "that if you went and told Sybil I was very anxious indeed to see her a little time before she left for the station, that you might hurry her up?"

"I'll try," the child promised. "I'll do my best, anyway."

She tripped across the lawn. Mr. Norden Smith nodded approvingly as he watched her.

"Nice child, that," he remarked. "Miss Cluley's sister, eh?"

Jermyn assented. Mr. Norden Smith was still watching Mary on her way to the house.

"She dances like the sunshine," he declared; "light on her feet as a fairy, isn't she? Just like her sister used to be at her age, I should think."

"They are very much alike," Jermyn agreed.

"I must say," Mr. Norden Smith continued, "that the manner in which Miss Cluley gave her evidence to-day was something wonderful. Not a tremor, not an indiscreet word; not a syllable too much, not a syllable too little; just the right amount of agitation. It was a triumph. A very clever young actress, I imagine, Miss Cluley. I only regret that I never happen to have seen her on the stage."

Jermyn's tone became a shade colder.

"I do not connect Miss Cluley's proficiency on the stage," he said, "with her deportment to-day. To-day she was simply a charming and well-bred young woman, forced into a very unpleasant and painful situation. She told the truth simply — she could do no more nor any less."

"Quite so," Mr. Norden Smith agreed, dryly. "Why, that's all right. By the by, Sir Jermyn," he continued, glancing around, "as we are here quite by ourselves for a moment or two, I must confess that I have felt just a little curious about those trifles we collected from the floor. I feel a sort of right to mention the matter, you know, because it was through me that they were collected, wasn't it? Miss Cluley

was so certain in her evidence that there had been no disagreement of any sort between her and Lord Lakenham. Was Miss Cluley, by any chance, wearing a white or ivory satin gown last night?"

"I do not remember the color of her gown," Jermyn replied, stiffly.

"Silly of me to mention it, perhaps," Mr. Norden Smith declared, swinging his spectacles slightly between his fingers. "As a criminal lawyer, however, I must say that the proceedings this morning interested me very much. There are not very many people who could possibly have committed that crime, and yet there doesn't seem, at present, notwithstanding the fact that your coroner, as you call him, handled the case in an exceedingly able fashion, there doesn't seem to be a shred of evidence against anybody."

"That is the general opinion," Jermyn assented, gravely.

"Not a single shred of evidence," Mr. Norden Smith repeated. "Well, it's a queer thing, isn't it? Everything in such a narrow compass, too. Seems odd to me that I should have stumbled up against an affair like this."

"It is strange indeed," Jermyn admitted. "In your country, I suppose, such tragedies are a little more common. I must say one reads about these things in the paper and the impression left is a very faint one. You feel, somehow, that they belong to another world. When anything of the sort absolutely happens under your own roof, though, it gives you sensations and emotions quite incredible. Sometimes I can't believe, even now, that poor Aynesworth is really gone, killed by some one in my billiard-room. People are

beginning to talk already of the Annerley murder case; and it's only a few hours ago that the poor fellow was with us and in boisterous spirits."

"I suppose he must have made himself objectionable to some one," Mr. Norden Smith remarked. "It's the fashion to be secretive, nowadays. One can't tell, even in one's own little circle of friends, whether two men whom you have known all your life are really attached to one another, or whether there is not a deadly enmity beneath their daily politeness. Say, I'd like to leave you my address, Sir Jermyn. I can't see that there is any way in which I can be of any further service to you in this matter, but in case you did want to communicate with me at any time, here you are. Brown, Shipley & Company, if I am in London or anywhere in Europe; and Manhattan Club in New York. You should take a trip to the States, Sir Jermyn."

"If ever I do," Jermyn replied, "I will return your call, if I may, under I trust more auspicious circumstances."

"We'll give you a bully time," Mr. Norden Smith assured him, holding out his hand. "Now I am off, if you'll allow me. I am planning to get to Lincoln to-night, if only my tires hold out. My regards to the little girl and my respectful compliments to Miss Cluley. If I thought she'd take it in the right way, I should like, as a criminal lawyer, you know, to convey to her my heartiest congratulations upon the way in which she went through that little ordeal this morning."

Mr. Norden Smith took his place in the car, which was waiting in front of the house, paused for a few

moments to light a cigar, and drove off. Jermyn turned away to find Mary coming towards him.

"Sybil will be in the library in five minutes," she announced,—"not the ordinary library, you know, but your little study, where you and she read the play. She doesn't want to come out in the gardens. I think she is afraid that the sun is hot and she has a headache. You'd better go in there now and wait for her."

"You're a dear, Mary," Jermyn declared.

"You'll come and see us in London, won't you?" the child begged.

"Of course I shall," Jermyn promised. "I hope — yes, I hope," he continued, "that before very long you will be here again."

Mary sighed.

"If you knew how I hated to go away! London is so hot and stuffy. Hurry, Jermyn, please. If Sybil gets there first, perhaps she won't wait. I have to go and get my hat on."

CHAPTER XIX

Jermyn passed up the steps, across the cool, dim hall and into his own little study, where less than forty-eight hours ago he had sat with Sybil and talked of the play and their future, and the wonderful life they meant to live together. It seemed as though this were another world in which they were living to-day, as though the people who belonged to the last one had changed into shadows, as though the sunlight had become moonlight, and all the splendor and joy of life itself had ceased to beat in his pulses, and his heart itself had grown cold. Always, too, there was that hideous sense of depression sitting like a dead weight upon his shoulder, a strange, sickening sense of apprehension which kept him suspicious always of the slightest change or movement in his surroundings. He began to wonder whether life was going to be like this always. The few times in which he had dared to think of the future had filled him with something like terror.

He sat at his desk and looked out into the room which so often during the hours of his work he had peopled with fancies and beautiful thoughts and dreams and hopes. Always he had been an idealist; perhaps, for the complete success of his work, a little too much so. He had hoped for the best, he had believed in the best. He had conceived and written always with the stimulus of the born optimist. This sudden plunge

into the cold waters was terrible for him. He sat in his place with bowed shoulders, and his brain seemed empty which only a few days ago had teemed with joyous visions. As he waited there the seconds seemed like minutes and the minutes like hours. She was coming and he had no idea what he should say to her. It couldn't be the same Sybil who was coming. Even though she stood by his side, even though her fingers rested upon his shoulders and her breath fell upon his cheeks, it couldn't be the same! Would his pulses beat, he wondered, as in the old days? Would his heart leap with the joy of her presence? Would his physical self, at any rate, respond to her coming? These seemed such idle questions, yet as he sat there he wondered, wondered without hope, with little more save a dull and hurtful curiosity.

When at last she came, it seemed, indeed, as though she were a very different person. All the lightness and the grace and the buoyancy appeared to have passed away from her. She was still and pale and cold. Her eyes seemed larger and they were encircled with black rims. Even Mr. Norden Smith would have admitted that at least she was not acting now. She came a little way into the room and a new sensation thrilled him, a sensation which he welcomed eagerly. Anything was better than the dull lethargy from which he had been suffering. The rush of pity which came from his heart even dimmed his eyes. He rose eagerly; she waved him back.

"Jermyn," she said, "Mary tells me that you are anxious to see me alone for a moment before we go. I am not sure that it is wise but you see I have come."

"Not wise!" he repeated. "Oh, Sybil!"

She closed her eyes as though to shut out the sight of him.

"Dear Jermyn," she went on, "please do not think that I want to ignore those things which have passed between us. Nothing can ever change them, nothing can ever make me feel differently, but you and I both know that a new thing has come into our lives, a new knowledge which we both share. It is no longer possible for us to speak of our love. It is better for us to try and ignore it."

"Sybil," he pleaded,—

"Ah, no, dear!" she interrupted. "Don't make it harder for me. I think that you and I both understand. I think that we are both capable of judging an action broadly and generously — forgivingly. But that isn't everything. We each have a terrible consciousness in our hearts, a consciousness which we shall never be able to get rid of. The best thing we can do is to steal away and fight our battle alone. I could not come to you; you must not come to me. Give me your hands, Jermyn."

She held them in hers almost passionately. The relief of tears shone in her eyes, her lips trembled even into a faint smile. He took her cold little fingers in his. His heart ached with a passionate desire to draw her nearer and nearer, yet it never occurred to him to yield. There was something between them, something invisible, something against which he was powerless.

"This is hard for us both," she continued softly. "I never dreamed that I could know such happiness as I felt only forty-eight hours ago. Thank you for it, Jermyn. It was too wonderful altogether. Now it is gone. It will never come back; it can never come back.

The shadow of that terrible thing must rest between us always. I never dreamed how awful a tragedy death might be."

Again she closed her eyes. She swayed a little on her feet. It was almost like a moment of yielding. A torrent of passionate words rose to his lips. He felt a sudden strength, a sudden wild desire to tear down this intangible, hateful barrier. No matter if he were thrown back time after time, he felt a wild desire to rebel. Then the door was quietly opened. Lucille entered. . . .

Lucille paused upon the threshold for a few brief seconds. Then she closed the door behind her and slowly advanced. She looked from one to the other and her eyes were full of mysterious yet anxious sympathy. Perhaps of the two women she was at that moment the greater actress, for she had entered the room with a sickly fear at her heart which found no expression in her well-chosen words. She adopted the most fitting, the most kindly pose. She was simply the friendly hostess.

"I really hate to interrupt," she said softly, "but if Miss Cluley must catch that train to town — it is the last, by the by — I am afraid that she ought to be going. It is already twenty minutes past three."

Their feet were back again upon the earth. The exultation of the moment had passed, the necessities of life were paramount.

"I most certainly must leave at once, then," Sybil declared hastily. "I had no idea that it was so late."

"The car is at the door," Lucille told her gently. "Your maid and the luggage have already gone on."

Sybil held out her hand. The terror was once more

in her eyes. Jermyn's heart ached for her. Words between them were like simple pathos; the tragedy of her coming and going was too great.

"Good-by!" he said.

She gave him one look and turned away. Lucille began to talk as they left the room — the grave, considerate chat of a hostess. Mary pounced upon them in the hall and took Jermyn by the arm.

"Dear Jermyn," she begged, "please promise that you will ask us down again very soon? And give my love to the freckle-faced boy, please, and tell him I was sorry not to see him again."

"I'll remember," Jermyn assured her.

"And you'll come and see us very, very soon, won't you?" she persisted. "Sybil will want you to, so shall I. And I'm ever so glad," she whispered in his ear, "that you're going to marry Sybil."

He swung her up into her place, with a kiss and a light word of farewell, and breathed a sigh almost of relief as the car swung away. Sybil's veil had fallen but for him it concealed nothing of the misery underneath. He stood quite still upon the steps, looking after them steadfastly. He scarcely noticed Lucille's arm stealing through his. She looked at him anxiously. Perhaps she realized that not the least difficult part of her task was still before her!

"Be thankful, Jermyn, that it is no worse," she murmured.

He turned upon her almost fiercely.

"Worse? What, in God's name, could be worse?"

"The prison van instead of your new *Napier*," she answered, with purposeful brutality.

CHAPTER XX

"What was the verdict?"

"Willful murder! What else could it be?"

Jermyn rose to his feet calmly enough and left the club smoking-room without undue haste or any outward signs of having overheard the conversation which had been carried on within a few feet of him. Nevertheless, the two men looked at one another a little ruefully.

"I had no idea that Annerley was behind that paper," one remarked. "I am afraid he must have overheard."

His companion shrugged his shoulders.

"He must be used to that sort of thing," he declared. "He's not the kind of fellow to care about the limelight, either."

"Hate it, I should think. One rather admires his pluck, under the cimcumstances. I hear his new play is coming on very soon with Sybil Cluley in the principal part — that is if nothing happens between now and then."

The man who had introduced the subject, smiled.

"What should happen?" he demanded. "After all, no reasonable person connects either of them with the affair. No motive, for one thing."

His companion, who was younger, and therefore more of a cynic, raised his eyebrows.

"One never knows," he said. "I think I'd answer for Annerley myself, but Sybil Cluley is a puzzle to every one. One doesn't know where to place the young comedy actress without a history."

"That's your beastly point of view," his older friend declared. "Have a drink?"

The fragment of conversation which he had overheard stirred no new emotion in Jermyn. Its own dramatic qualities and the omnipotence of the half-penny press, had chosen to make the murder of Lord Lakenham a *cause célèbre*. The sensation was only now, after nearly six weeks, abating a little for sheer lack of fuel. There seemed to be nothing more to write about. To all appearance the police had dropped the case. Only those immediately concerned knew better. Jermyn himself was conscious of a ceaseless surveillance. Sybil was subjected to something even more rigorous. These two alone, perhaps, knew that there was no slackening in the hunt. And at Scotland Yard, Inspector Fielden, who was in charge of the case, had made one dogmatic statement from which he was wholly disinclined to budge.

"The affair was done by an amateur," he pronounced. "It was done under circumstances which make adequate evidence exceedingly difficult to obtain. It was done by an amateur, however, and sooner or later the inevitable will happen, history will repeat itself — that amateur will give himself or herself away. Any one can commit a crime; no one can conceal all traces of it forever but a person with the instincts of a criminal."

Jermyn left the club without any clear idea of where he was going. He had spent several hours already,

earlier in the day, in his study, trying in vain to write. The thought of an immediate return to it was suddenly hateful. Then he thought of Lucille; he remembered his duty to her. He had not seen her for many days and her presence was, at any rate, always soothing. Slowly he made his way to Grosvenor Street, where she had a small house. It was almost his first spontaneous visit to her since his return to London.

Lucille was at home and he was ushered at once into her dainty little drawing-room. She was dispensing tea to two visitors when he entered, both of whom seemed to Jermyn, whose nerves were all on edge, a trifle over-cordial in their greeting of him. It was as though they wished him to understand that although they were aware of certain unpleasant rumors, they were prepared to disregard them and to range themselves on his side.

"This is indeed an unexpected honor, my dear Jermyn," Lucille declared, smiling, as she handed him some tea. "I am really glad to see you. I was going to ring you up this afternoon."

She touched his fingers fondly as they met. Her eyes were soft and bright with pleasure. For a moment he allowed himself to be sufficiently distracted from his dejection to watch her admiringly. She certainly gratified his sense of the picturesque, both as regards her own personality and her environment. She wore a long jacket of black silk, with a little ruffle of white lace at her throat and a great bunch of pink roses drawn carelessly but very effectively through her waistband. Her face seemed to have lost its occasionally hard expression and her eyes their furtive anxiety. She seemed somehow younger, seemed to have tem-

porarily abandoned her more matronly pose and returned to the slim, less assured elegance of girlhood. Her setting, too, was beautiful. The little drawing-room with its soft gray coloring and finely selected French furniture, was famous not only for its treasures but for their tasteful arrangement. Despite a certain reluctance which he could scarcely analyze, Jermyn, from the depths of the easy-chair into which she had gently forced him, watched his hostess and was conscious of a sense of serenity which certainly the club, and more certainly his own rooms, failed in those days to afford him.

"I do love to see my friends comfortable at this hour of the day," Lucille murmured, after she had insisted upon the easy-chair. "I like to see them lounge. Complete repose is such a stimulus to natural conversation. I have always noticed that people who are sitting in uncomfortable chairs, with a cup of tea in one hand and a plate upon their knees, talk, if they talk at all, in a stilted, unentertaining fashion."

Lady Florence Effingham nodded approvingly. Mrs. Starr Hamilton, who was the other caller, smiled.

"Your theory, then, is that a state of repose is conducive to entertaining conversation?"

"Absolutely," Lucille admitted; "especially to tea-time conversation."

"Are there special features, then, about tea-time conversation?" Jermyn inquired.

"Naturally," his hostess replied. "Tea-time conversation should be of the nature of gossip; good-natured always, if possible, and leading the way to confidences. One doesn't look for epigrams or smart talk at this hour of the day."

"I'm quite sure you are right," Lady Florence agreed. "I shall increase my stock of easy-chairs at once and perhaps my tea-parties will become as popular as yours. Tell me, Lucille dear, what are your plans for the autumn? Are you going to stay in town or go to Scotland, or go abroad early? I wish you would come to us at Blicklyn."

"My plans are scarcely made yet," Lucille answered, after a momentary hesitation. "I am not sure — it depends."

She glanced across at Jermyn, who was talking with Mrs. Starr Hamilton. A sudden swift and splendid impulse leaped into her brain. Why not? Jermyn had come to her of his own accord. He seemed in an acquiescent, almost an appreciative mood. It was time that she struck. Perhaps this was the best way. She was instinctively convinced that the moment was propitious.

"I do not know that I ought to give away our little secret just yet," she said softly, glancing across at Jermyn with a faint suggestion of half apologetic inquiry in her tone and the lift of her eyebrows. "However, I suppose it doesn't matter very much, and Florence is one of my oldest friends."

Lady Florence sat suddenly upright in her chair.

"My dear! You don't mean to say —"

"But I do," Lucille interrupted. "Jermyn and I are going to be married very soon indeed."

There was something in Jermyn's eyes for a moment which would have startled either of his two fellow-callers if they had been looking his way. Lucille saw it and went cold. After all, had she made a mistake?

"My dear — my dear Lucille!" Lady Florence cried, holding out her hands. "You have taken my

breath away. I'm sure I congratulate you both most heartily. I am delighted."

"And I, dear Duchess," Mrs. Starr Hamilton echoed sweetly. "I cannot pretend, unfortunately, that I know either of you as well as Lady Florence does, but you must let me wish you every possible happiness. Such a suitable match, too! Really, I cannot imagine why we never thought of it before, except, of course, that no one ever does marry the people you expect them to."

Lady Florence had turned to Jermyn.

"My heartiest — truly, my heartiest congratulations, dear Jermyn!" she exclaimed, emphatically. "You know what I think of Lucille, don't you? There is no one quite like her. You are indeed fortunate."

Jermyn had risen to his feet. There was nothing left of that glitter in his eyes but his voice sounded hard; there was no real feeling in his words.

"Thank you very much, Lady Florence," he said. "Thank you, too, Mrs. Starr Hamilton."

Not a word more, no reference whatever as to his good fortune. There was a certain grimness, also, about his appearance, which had a repressing effect upon the storm of questions which the two women were prepared to launch. For a few moments he was left outside the circle. Lucille, apparently quite at her ease, and with just a shade of most becoming color in her cheeks, chatted with her callers almost in an undertone. Presently they took their leave. Jermyn escorted them to the door and, under cover of a second edition of congratulatory speeches, they at last departed. . . .

Lucille was awaiting Jermyn's return, standing upon the hearthrug, her elbow upon the mantelpiece, her head resting upon her hand. She turned eagerly towards him as he entered. Her eyes were soft and bright and full of fire, her pose exceedingly graceful, her little gesture of appeal rendered entirely natural by that slight access of real fear from which she was indeed suffering.

"Jermyn, you are not angry with me? Tell me that you are not angry with me," she pleaded. "It had to be done soon, you know, and I have waited. I had hoped that it might have come from you."

He closed the door deliberately behind him. Then he came over to her. Her heart began to sink. She was at her best and she had failed to move him. There was not a single spark of admiration, or feeling of any sort save suffering, in his hard, thin face.

"You mean to take your pound of flesh, then?" he asked, wondering a little at the sound of his own voice, which seemed to come from a great distance.

"You are not polite," she murmured.

He flared up. The sudden impulse of passion was good for him. Even she was not sorry to see it. The icy tension of the moment was broken.

"What, in God's name, has politeness to do with it?" he demanded. "Truth is the only thing worth counting between you and me. I do not want you, Lucille. I'm not a woman's man and your good looks and your subtle poses are nothing to me. I am one of the people of this generation in whom you don't seem to believe. I love one woman and I can love no other."

"A murderess!" she whispered.

"Call her what you like," he went on fiercely. "You

call yourself a woman of the world, you pretend to know things, you talk always as though life had yielded to you the keys of her secret chambers. Don't you know as much as this? — that when a man's in earnest, the woman he loves may be a poisoner, a sinner, a very Borgia, if you will, but she is none of these things for him — not for him. She is just the woman he loves — that's all that counts. There isn't anything else."

A little breath came through her teeth. Her face was very white, her eyes shone.

"I should like to be loved like that!" she cried softly.

"Then find some one who'll do it," he retorted, with a note of savagery in his tone. "Don't you know me well enough, Lucille, to understand that I haven't the gift of partition? Where love is concerned I am the narrowest person who ever breathed. Sybil is the first woman I ever cared for and she will be the last."

The light was passing from Lucille's face. She seemed suddenly tired and older.

"Do you mean, Jermyn, that you would marry Sybil Cluley to-day?"

"If she would have me, I would," he answered readily. "In the study at Annerley, the day she left, I would have asked her but for our compact."

She turned her back upon him for a moment. Then she laughed shortly.

"You amaze me," she declared. "Jermyn Annerley, scholar, man of letters, an æsthete, a humble disciple of Epicurus, an aristocrat! What about the obligations of race and character now, my dear Jermyn?"

"There is at least no obligation for me to stay here and listen to your tauntings!" he exclaimed, turning

away. "I have discovered what I came to find out — you mean to hold me to your infernal bargain!"

"For your own sake, without a doubt," she answered firmly. "You shall never marry Sybil Cluley. Furthermore," she added, "if you take my advice you will keep away from her. I suppose you know that she is watched night and day?"

"Is that part of your work?" he demanded.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"My dear Jermyn," she replied, "if I opened my lips at all, the watching would soon be over! If I did my duty and spoke just half a dozen words, Sybil Cluley would spend to-night in prison. Be careful that you don't try me too far. Be careful, Jermyn!"

For a moment they both stood quite still. Her bosom was heaving, her eyes flashing. She faced him without quailing and there were cruel things in her face. He turned and left the house.

CHAPTER XXI

Jermyn had rooms in Mount Street, to which he made his way immediately after leaving Lucille. The house in which they were situated was an old one, and the rooms themselves were unusually large and somberly furnished. His study was separated from his sleeping apartment by old-fashioned folding-doors. The hangings, pictures and upholstery were all severe in tone and a little gloomy. Nevertheless, the whole place was very much more to his taste than the apartments to be obtained in modern and more luxurious flats. When he was in residence for some time, the abundance of topical literature and reviews, the flowers which were sent up daily from Annerley, the general air of habitableness produced by these means, pleasantly relieved the severity of his study. It possessed, even, an air of its own, which he found soothing and into which he seemed to fit.

His servant met him in the hall. Parkes, too, was an importation from Annerley — a serious-faced, conscientious servant, but a confirmed pessimist.

"Mr. Levenden, sir, has been ringing up from the theatre three or four times," he announced. "He would like to speak to you at once on the telephone."

Jermyn allowed himself to be relieved of his hat and stick and made his way into his study. The telephone, almost the only note of modernity in the apartment,

stood by the side of his easy-chair. He rang up the theatre and asked for Mr. Levenden.

"I understand you want to speak to me, Mr. Levenden," he said, as soon as a familiar voice from the other end had answered his first inquiry.

"That's so, Sir Jermyn," was the prompt reply. "I do want to speak to you particularly — matter I am most anxious about."

"Concerning the play?" Jermyn asked.

The voice at the other end hesitated.

"Yes, concerning the play — indirectly. I wonder whether you could possibly come round for a moment. I called to see you early this afternoon, and I am so infernally busy just now. Besides, the rehearsal isn't over."

"I will be round in ten minutes," Jermyn promised.

Action of any sort was a relief to him. He walked to the theatre, indulged in his distaste for meeting friends and acquaintances in those days by choosing the by-ways so far as possible, still a little numb from the shock of Lucille's declaration and the realization of the price which he was called upon to pay for Sybil's salvation.

He passed through the stage door after a respectful greeting from the commissionaire, and made his way towards Mr. Levenden's room. As he crossed the back of the stage he came to a sudden standstill. The rehearsal was still in progress. He heard the sound of Sybil's clear, mocking laugh, followed by his own lines:

"Dear Henry, for a man of your experience you are certainly very ignorant of women and their ways. Nature paid us an unkind trick when she dealt out the counters, when she made men ingenuous and women

subtle. You trust too easily, my friend. The best woman in the world will look you in the face and lie for the sake of the man she loves, and the better woman she is, the more convincingly she will do it."

Jermyn stole on tiptoe to where he could catch a little glimpse of the company upon the stage. With a sudden thrill he passed the end of a piece of scenery which had concealed Sybil. She had just completed her speech and was laughing into the face of the man to whom she had made it. From where he stood she seemed unchanged. She was fashionably dressed, and the little fur toque with its scarlet quill sat jauntily on her wealth of soft brown hair. She had thrown herself entirely into her part. She had forgotten. For a moment he almost envied her her profession.

Jermyn found Mr. Levenden in his room, signing letters, and Mr. Levenden was unfeignedly glad to see him. He wheeled up an easy-chair for his visitor, placed cigarettes at his elbow, and himself closed the door behind his secretary, whom he bustled out of the room.

"This is rather like the mountain coming to Mahomet, Sir Jermyn," he declared. "It's awfully good of you to come round like this. I can't tell you how much I have to do these days."

"It was perfectly convenient for me to come," Jermyn assured him. "I can't pretend to be a busy man like you. What's the matter? Anything gone wrong in rehearsal? Perhaps you'd like me to take one this week? I suppose I ought to, really."

"It isn't that," Mr. Levenden replied. "We are always glad to have you there, you know, but just at first, while we go through the groundwork of stage directions, that isn't so important. Your manuscript and

author's notes are always so clear. It's another little matter that's bothering me."

Jermyn took up a cigarette and lit it.

"If I can be of any service," he murmured.

"The part of 'Nora'," Mr. Levenden pronounced, "is an exceedingly difficult one."

"Surely not too difficult for Miss Cluley?" Jermyn interposed, smiling.

"Not in the least," the manager assented, hastily. "Please don't misunderstand me. On the contrary, it bids fair, so far as one can tell at present, to be one of her greatest successes."

"Then what is the trouble?"

"It is such a good part," Mr. Levenden continued, "and it suits Miss Cluley so marvelously well, that I am at my wits' end to find an understudy who could even speak the lines, much more act them. So far, I may tell you, Sir Jermyn, I haven't come across any one who'd be the slightest use, and without going to the 'stars' I scarcely see where I am going to find her. 'Nora' is Miss Cluley and Miss Cluley is 'Nora'. Without her it would be simply hopeless."

"Well?"

The manager moved uneasily in his chair. He was always a little afraid of this strange young man, who seemed to have wandered into theatreland from some region which he, at any rate, knew nothing about. Jermyn's face during the last few moments had grown very austere. He had, perhaps, some premonition of what was coming.

"The long and the short of it is, Sir Jermyn," Mr. Levenden said at length, "that there's been a lot of talk about that unfortunate affair down at Annerley, and

during the last few days there have been persistent rumors, rumors one can't afford altogether to neglect."

"Concerning whom?"

Jermyn's words were like drops of ice but the manager was not unduly sensitive. Besides, it was a matter of business with him.

"Concerning Miss Cluley. I was told this morning by some one upon whose word I can generally rely, that Miss Cluley would be in prison within a week."

Jermyn stood quite still. The fingers which held his cigarette did not even tremble.

"You can't believe such rubbish as this, Mr. Levenden," he protested.

"I don't want to believe it," Mr. Levenden retorted, eagerly. "I am bound to face facts, though, and there is this big, black, ugly one standing straight in front of me, and that is that if this rumor should turn out to be even founded upon the truth, then all the money I put into the play will be lost. I can't afford to risk such a situation, Sir Jermyn, and that's the truth. I've had other losses."

"If this is how you are feeling, Mr. Levenden," Jermyn said, "I am glad that you have sent for me. Let me tell you, as one who should know something about the facts, that your fears are entirely ridiculous. There is no more chance of Miss Cluley's being arrested on this charge than there is of my being called upon to answer for it myself. I am surprised that you should have listened to such foolish rumors. It is absolutely impossible to connect Miss Cluley with the death of Lord Lakenham in any way whatsoever."

Though Levenden seemed somewhat relieved, he was not wholly convinced.

"There's a great deal of talk," he insisted, "and I don't see where it all comes from."

"It comes from people who know nothing whatever about the matter," Jermyn declared. "Lord Lakenham and Miss Sybil Cluley were, to my certain knowledge, on the friendliest of terms. They had only met the day before, and Lord Lakenham was already her admirer."

The manager drummed with his fingers upon the desk before which he was sitting.

"There is a persistent rumor, Sir Jermyn," he pointed out, "that such was not the case. I have heard it stated most confidently that Lord Lakenham had known Miss Cluley in her less prosperous days, in the days before she came to London."

"We can none of us be responsible for rumors, Mr. Levenden," Jermyn said coldly.

Mr. Levenden felt that he was scarcely getting on, but the thought of his closed theatre acted as a stimulus.

"I can assure you, Sir Jermyn," he went on, "that I most sincerely hope that it is so. No one could have a greater respect and regard for Miss Cluley than I have, and her behavior at all times, both in the theatre and out of it, has been entirely and exceptionally irreproachable. At the same time, the police make mistakes sometimes and I cannot afford to put all my eggs in one basket. I want to take this opportunity of asking you, Sir Jermyn, how you would regard a proposition to transfer Miss Cluley's part to Ida Hamilton, provided, of course, we could induce Miss Hamilton to accept it?"

"I can answer you very briefly," Jermyn replied,

without a moment's hesitation. "I would sooner put the manuscript of my play upon the fire than have it appear under such circumstances."

"Miss Hamilton has a large following," the manager persisted. "She is, as you know, quite one of our most brilliant actresses, and she has had experience. I believe that she would make a huge success of the part."

"The question of Miss Hamilton's capacity does not interest me," Jermyn remarked. "My play was written for Miss Cluley and she alone will play the part of 'Nora'. I trust that you have not hinted anything of this to her?"

"I have not said a word," Mr. Levenden assured him hastily. "Of course, if that is your feeling there is no more to say about it. We must hope for the best, although I must admit that I am anxious."

"What would your loss be in the event of the theatre having to close for the reason you suggest?" Jermyn asked.

Mr. Levenden shrugged his shoulders.

"Anything up to four or five thousand pounds."

"I take the responsibility," Jermyn promised. "If the run of the piece is stopped, or if it is never produced through anything happening to Miss Cluley of the nature you suggest, I take the losses upon my shoulders. I will be content to accept a statement from your accountant as to the amount."

Mr. Levenden drew a sigh of relief.

"Sir Jermyn," he said, "you are behaving like a prince. You have taken a big load off my shoulders."

Jermyn rose to his feet.

"You have been anticipating trouble quite need-

lessly, Mr. Levenden," he declared confidently. "By the way, I propose attending rehearsals myself next week. Will you see that I get the calls?"

"With pleasure, Sir Jermyn — with pleasure!" Mr. Levenden assented, making a note upon a memorandum tablet. "Mount Street still, I suppose? I am only too glad you are coming. To tell you the truth, you know, that was another point which was exciting a little comment. Before her visit to Annerley Court, this very unfortunate visit, you and Miss Cluley were a great deal together. Since this affair we have scarcely seen you at the theatre. I have heard it said that since that time you have not been seen to speak to her."

Jermyn frowned.

"I had no idea that such comments would have been made," he said. "I have not been in London very long. The reason I have perhaps seen less of Miss Cluley is that I have recently become engaged to the Duchesse de Sayers. If such remarks as those to which you allude have been made, however, I shall take an early opportunity of setting matters right."

"I congratulate you, I am sure," Mr. Levenden ventured, "congratulate you most heartily. Upon my word, it's rather a relief to hear you so confident about Miss Cluley. As nice a young lady as ever breathed, quiet and a real worker. It would be a horrible shame to have her upset in any way."

Jermyn took up his hat.

"If they haven't all gone," he remarked, "I should like, after what you have told me, to see Miss Cluley for a few minutes."

"An excellent idea," Mr. Levenden agreed.

The two men walked out together. The rehearsal

itself was over but every one was talking cheerfully together in a corner of the barely-lit stage. Sybil had just taken leave of the others and was on her way out. Jermyn, with a word of farewell to the manager and a wave of the hand to the rest of the company, hurried after her.

"Miss Cluley — Sybil!"

She turned quickly around and stood for a moment quite still. In the gloom of the ill-lit place, with its cavernous shadows, she appeared to him to look like a ghost. He realized in that moment something of the anguish through which she had passed. They held hands for a moment almost in silence. Then, conscious of the little group at the further end of the stage, they commenced to talk banalities. In the narrow passage outside, Jermyn felt suddenly weak. The slight perfume of her hair, her familiar clothes, her close presence, all affected him powerfully. He took her hand and drew her unresistingly towards him.

"Dear!" he murmured. "Dear Sybil!"

Her eyes shone into his like stars. They were alone and he seemed caught up on the wings of a new passion. A splendid recklessness possessed him. He held her tightly to him and kissed her on the lips.

"Don't, dear Jermyn," she implored,—"don't!"

He released her at once. She was making a piteous little face at him but somehow he felt the better for that single wild moment. He felt, too, that at the bottom of her heart she also was glad of it.

"I am sorry," he said, "or rather I am not sorry. I want to talk to you, Sybil. May I take you home?"

She shook her head.

"I am not going home," she told him. "I am meet-

ing Mary at a tea-place and afterwards we are going to the *Gaiety*."

"Where is the tea-place?" he inquired. "I can take you there, at any rate."

"In St. James's Street."

He sent the commissionaire for a taxicab and handed her in.

"It is quite time I saw Mary myself," he declared, "and before I go I have something to tell you."

"News?" she asked, suddenly paling.

"Not that sort of news," he answered hastily. "Nothing about — it."

She leaned back in the cab with a little sigh of content.

"Don't let's talk at all just yet," she begged. "Sit by my side — like this. I want to rest, to try and imagine for a moment that nothing has happened at all except a nightmare — a long, awful nightmare. Humor me, dear, please."

He obeyed at once, only he took her hand and held it in his. So they rode in silence through the busy streets, her eyes shining as she looked steadily ahead, he most of the time watching her, so slim — and quiet — to-night, it seemed to him, so fragile. Then they drew up suddenly before *Rumpelmayer's*. She looked like a child awakened from a dream. A policeman, walking slowly by, glanced into their cab. His heart ached as he saw her little start of fear, saw the old look creep momentarily into her eyes. Then she saw him watching her and a little smile, piteous though it was, parted her lips.

"I am foolish, am I not? Never mind," she added, bravely, "those five minutes were worth having."

CHAPTER XXII

Mary and a severe-looking maid were waiting for them upon the pavement. The former welcomed Jermyn with a little cry of delight.

"You bad, bad Jermyn!" she exclaimed, with real reproach in her tone. "But oh! it is good to see you again!"

Jermyn held the child's hands tightly in his.

"You'll have to forgive me, Mary dear," he begged. "I haven't been in London so very long, you see, and here we are together again at last, anyhow."

"You're going to have tea with us?" she insisted. "Tea!"

Jermyn glanced at his watch.

"Tea at this time of the evening! Do you know that it is nearly seven o'clock?"

"I couldn't get away before," Sybil explained, "and anyhow, we girls are not such slaves as men are to meals at regular hours."

Jermyn smiled.

"Well, I propose dinner — dinner, say, at the *Milan*, in the grill-room, with ices and boxes of chocolates afterwards. What do you say to that, Mary? Isn't that better than tea and sugared cakes?"

"I say, yes!" Mary decided promptly. "I think it would be just lovely. I've had tea, really, hours ago."

"Are you sure that you can spare the time?" Sybil

asked. "And what about your own engagements? Aren't you dining anywhere?"

"I'm dining with you," Jermyn declared. "Somehow, I felt an undue sense of exhilaration creeping over me a little time ago. I must have known. Come along — here's a taxi."

"Couldn't we go to a quieter place than the *Milan?*" Sybil suggested, doubtfully.

"The child will like it," Jermyn said. "Besides — I have another reason for going there. Let it be the *Milan*, if you please, and let us," he went on, lowering his voice —"let us make believe a little longer, Sybil. You and I and Mary are just going to forget."

Mary's ears and her intelligence were alike sharp. She overheard and clapped her hands.

"Yes, yes!" she cried eagerly, "let us forget all about Lord Lakenham! I don't think he could have been really nice or he wouldn't have made so much trouble."

Sybil looked at her reproachfully.

"Mary!"

"Don't be shocked, please, Sybil," the child continued. "I can't help it. Everything was so beautiful before and everything has been so dull and miserable since."

"To-night," Jermyn interposed quickly, "it is going to be beautiful again. I agree altogether with Mary. It is our duty to be cheerful. While Mary drinks ginger beer, we will drink *Pommery*. We will eat and drink and be merry and forget the end of the quotation."

They reached the café and were received at once by the chief *maître d'hôtel* with many bows and expres-

sions of pleasure. They selected a table in a corner which was not too inconspicuous, and Jermyn took up the menu.

"We will consult Henri here about our dinner," he declared. "There must be chicken, of course, and chocolate ice, and for us sensible people, Sybil, what do you say? *Sole à la Normandy?* What do we eat?"

"I am not sure that I have not forgotten," Sybil answered. "I think that Mary mostly gives the orders at home."

Jermyn gave some brief instructions to the waiter.

"And *Pommery Brut 1904*," he wound up. "And now tell me about this young lady! When does she go to that boarding-school?"

Mary made a wry face.

"I wish you hadn't reminded me," she complained, a little dolefully.

"Mary is going to Brussels to-morrow," Sybil said. "I know that she is going to be very happy and I am sure that it is best for her. Of course, I shall miss her more than I can say, but there is nothing for her to do at all when I am at the theatre, and there is so much rehearsing just now."

"There are always holidays," Jermyn remarked cheerfully. "There are always, too, trips to Brussels. One can get to Brussels very easily, nowadays, you know."

Mary clapped her hands.

"You will come," she cried,—"you and Sybil, too? Oh, you must!"

"We will come," Jermyn promised. "Don't be afraid of that, little lady. We will come and charm you from behind those gray stone walls and show you

some of the vanities of life. It is, I presume, a modern establishment to which Mary is going?"

"Fairly modern, I think," Sybil agreed.

Mr. Levenden passed by with a party of friends, and stopped to greet them in some surprise. Others of the company were there, too, and at a table only a few yards away, a hard-featured, commonplace looking man with a black moustache, who looked a trifle out of place in such surroundings, sat eating his dinner with a paper propped up before him, yet with his eyes wandering often around the room. He never seemed to glance towards either Sybil or Jermyn, but once they exchanged a look and they knew. Jermyn tossed off a glass of wine.

"My attendant," he whispered.

She shook her head.

"Surely mine! I see him wherever I go."

He leaned towards her. Mary's attention had been distracted by the entrance of some American children, with bows of enormous size in their hair.

"Dear," he said, "sometimes I wish I had talked to you more openly. What I want you to believe is that they may watch and watch and suspect, but the thing is dead. There is no more evidence to be swept up. The cleverest men in the world would only find all the doors locked. The shadow is terrible, lying across our path all the time, but the danger is over — there is no more danger."

"You really believe that?" she asked, with a little gasp of relief.

"I am sure of it," he answered. "For the rest, I wish I could take away even those other and darker thoughts. You know as well as I do that Lakenham

was not a good man. You know as well as I do what sort of a bargain he was trying to drive. Such a man invites reprisals. It is part of the game he plays and part of the risk he runs."

She closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, however, something of the haggard suffering seemed to have passed from her face.

"I am glad we have spoken of this," she said. "To-night — no, not to-night, perhaps, but very soon — I am going to tell you of that chapter of my past which Lord Lakenham recalled to me, and which drove me almost mad with terror. You shall know, Jermyn, and you shall judge. After all, it doesn't matter very much now, does it?"

Mary once more claimed their attention. From that point their little feast became almost uproarious. They chatted of the play and its possibilities; they talked nonsense as they might have done a few months ago. For that hour, at any rate, they had stepped out of the shadow. The man who looked over his paper and watched them every now and then, saw nothing in their faces of brooding care. To all appearance they were the lightest-hearted little group in the place.

At a few minutes past eight, Jermyn drove with them to the *Gaiety* and left them at the door. Sybil turned round to wave her hand as they disappeared. The old delightful smile had parted her lips; her eyes shone into his. There was even a dash of the old coquetry in the way she carried her head, in the swing of her exquisite figure. Jermyn stood on the pavement for a moment or two after they had disappeared. Then he turned away and drove to his rooms. . . .

That night a very demon of unrest possessed him.

He had no engagements and he had proposed to spend the evening over some work he was doing for a review. His efforts to settle down, however, were all in vain. His brain was full of torturing thoughts. Out of the shadows, Lucille seemed continually to come and mock him with her smooth, cold voice, the curve of her lips, the gleam of her eyes, passionate yet minatory. He heard her calm yet graceful announcement of their engagement, the little ripple of interest, the pressure of the fingers, the honeyed words of those women who only that afternoon had forced their congratulations upon him. Then he saw Lakenham, cold and dead; saw the small ivory pistol which Lucille had secreted; saw the fragments of Sybil's gown upon the floor; saw her crushed roses lying by the side of the murdered man's hand; saw her still, cold face the first time they had met afterwards. All the happiness of the evening seemed to pass away like breath from the face of a mirror. He could forget no longer. He was a prey to torturing thoughts. The kiss which he had given her burned upon his lips. He thought of her as she had stood upon the steps of the theatre, smiling at him innocently, joyously, with that wonderful lure in her eyes which a French critic had once raved about.

He tried to read but it was in vain. His pulses seemed to be beating at fever heat, his temples were throbbing. He threw open the window. Although it was now early October, it was a soft, warm night. There were stars in the sky, a yellow moon, the faintest movement of the trees in the distant square. Dimly he could hear the roar of the city. The sky southwards was stained with the reflection of its million lights. He had wasted hours. The theatres were emptying now.

He could see her driving homewards, leaning back in the taxi, thinking, perhaps, of him. He could see the whole procession of carriages and cabs, the throngs in the streets, the great pleasure-loving, pleasure-sated crowd passing backwards and forwards to the gayly-lit restaurants, or to their homes, to whatever feast might await them upon the table of life. And he sat there alone with his books, without any human being to bear him company. A crowd of unfamiliar thoughts came rushing into his brain. After all, he was a man like the others. His was the same birthright, even though he had not chosen to fritter it away in small love-affairs, in the flirtations of salad days. Yet he was not different from others. Deep down in his being there was a passion as strong and compelling as it is given to any man to feel; chained, perhaps, by reason of a certain discriminating fastidiousness, a religious sense of offering it in its entirety, but tearing now at its chain wildly, madly. Some breath of wind, a strain of music, a fragrant memory, perhaps the lingering sweetness of that kiss upon his lips, had brought him an evil turn. As he stood there, he felt the slow fire burning up in his veins. There was but one woman in this world for him, whether he died to-morrow or lived to the full measure of his days. Weren't the by-ways of the world filled with men whom opportunities had passed by? His hand crept to his waistcoat pocket. Once more he felt the key which Mary had asked him to keep for her as they had entered the restaurant. A crowd of bewildering, magnificent, quivering thoughts struggled into his mind. He thrust them down, only to find them leap up again, stronger and stronger every time. He stood like a man at bay, fighting with some unchained

thing in his life of whose very existence he had scarcely dreamed. A prig, some men had called him, because he had been a clean liver; a cold-blooded sort of chap, a well-known theatrical manager had once said of him at a supper-party. Both accusations were true, perhaps, in their way, but Jermyn knew now that his time had come. Again and again he threw himself into his chair and struggled with his work. It was the very vainest of efforts. Some new power possessed him; some new, invincible force was stupefying his will.

He rose and crept out into the hall. Silently though he went, Parkes heard him and glided to his side.

"You are going out, sir?" he asked.

"For a little time," Jermyn answered.

"Will you dress, sir? Your things are all ready."

Jermyn shook his head.

"I will go as I am. Get me my coat and hat."

He passed out into the night. The air was soft, the broad streets were packed with motor-cars and taxi-cabs and electric broughams. Women in snowy-white opera cloaks, bejeweled, beautified by the impression which was all one could gather of them, leaned back amongst the cushions; well-satisfied men sat by their sides. A boy and a girl drove by in a hansom, with their arms unblushingly around one another. There were couples walking arm in arm along the pavement, and whispering as they went. It was some devil that was in the atmosphere that night, some witchery which had started the call to which for so long his blood had failed to respond. He hailed a passing taxi and jumped in.

"Burley Court," he told the man.

CHAPTER XXIII

Sybil drew the reading lamp a little nearer her and opened a copy of her part. Her little flat was on the topmost floor of the building and at eleven o'clock the street outside was almost deserted. Her maid had gone to bed. Sybil's solitude was immeasurable and complete. The very quietness beguiled her thoughts away from her work. Calm and self-composed though she tried to remain throughout the days, it was these lonely hours which she sometimes feared. To-night the battle was to begin afresh. She felt them coming, all those demons of regret and memory against which she seemed to be fighting always a losing battle. She rose to her feet and looked half wildly around her. If only there could be escape!

The clock ticked steadily on, a little piece of coal fell on to the hearth and sizzled out. There was no sound upon which she could focus her attention, no way of escape from the thoughts which were already quickening the beating of her heart. Then something happened, something entirely unexpected. The lift stopped at the flat below. Some one stepped out and commenced to ascend the few remaining stairs. Sybil glanced at the clock. A visitor at such an hour was an impossibility. She moved to the sitting-room door and stood with it open in her hand, waiting for the bell. But there was no bell. A key was fitted into the lock;

the door was slowly opened. A little cry broke from her lips, a cry which died away before it was half uttered. It was Jermyn who entered.

Her lips faltered his name. She gazed at him in blank astonishment. He closed the door behind him; then he came softly towards her and passed by her side into the sitting-room. All the time her eyes never left his face. There was a change there, something she did not understand.

"Mary gave me her key to take care of to-night," he whispered.

"But why have you come — now — at this time of night?"

His eyes told her. There was a new thing there, something which half gladdened and half terrified her.

"Because I couldn't help it!" he cried hoarsely. "Because I couldn't keep away! All the time this key has been burning in my pocket, and there is something which you must be told, something which was there before me like a black shadow all the time we sat at dinner, something I have tried to strangle but can't, something I must tell you to-night."

"Something more?" she faltered. "Oh, my God! Something more?"

"I am going to marry Lucille de Sayers."

She shrank a little away yet she did not seem to wholly understand. There was a certain stricken horror in her face but her chief expression was still one of bewilderment.

"You are going to marry the Duchesse de Sayers — to marry her? I don't understand, Jermyn."

"I am going to marry her," he muttered, "very soon."

"There is some reason for this?" she asked, with trembling lips.

"There is," he answered.

"You must tell me at once," she insisted,—"at once, mind. I thought that I had enough to bear, but this —! Tell me, why are you doing it?"

"Because she knows!" Jermyn said slowly.

Sybil for a moment was stupefied; her brain seemed to refuse to work. Then she began to laugh — a queer little unnatural sound.

"Because — she knows," she repeated. "Jermyn, you must write a melodrama about it. Do things really happen like this?"

"It is the price of her silence," Jermyn went on. "I couldn't believe her myself at first but she is in earnest. She knows and she insists."

She drew Jermyn towards a chair and seated herself on an ottoman by his feet.

"You poor man!" she murmured, with quivering lip. "If only I had never come on that ill-fated visit! Jermyn, doesn't it seem all too horrible? That man — oh, how terrified I have been of him! He is dead, so what I am going to say must sound horrible, and yet it is the truth; it is my one consolation both by day and by night. He was a brute — he was not fit to live."

"You are right," Jermyn admitted, almost eagerly. "It was the pendulum of justice which swung. Aynesworth deserved his fate. Yet you and I must carry the burden of it on our shoulders all our days."

"Does she know," Sybil asked, "that you — that you do not care?"

He laughed hardly.

"She knows," he reminded her, "that on the morning of that day I told her that I was the happiest man on earth because you, the only woman I had ever loved, had promised to marry me. She knows at least that I am not capricious."

"Is it that she cares, do you think?"

"In her way," Jermyn replied,—"yes, in her way she cares."

"How did she — find out?"

"Her hand was down at bridge. She walked along the terrace," he answered wearily. "Oh, she knows right enough! And, Sybil, she isn't quite like other women. She isn't altogether English, you know. She is full of queer passions and humors. I believe that she was on the very point of telling the truth that night."

Sybil covered her face with her hands.

"Sometimes it all seems too much for me," she said quietly. "Night after night I sit here and the torturing thoughts come, and it seems to me that no one was ever so miserable, that no one ever could be so unhappy. Now there is this — you are going to marry!"

"Don't talk as though it were a matter of choice, for God's sake!" he exclaimed. "I marry to save —"

"Don't!" she interrupted.

"I marry to keep a bargain, then," he went on. "I marry to seal that woman's lips. I wish to heavens I had wrung her neck before I had ever let her come to Annerley!"

Sybil in those few moments looked like a woman for whom the storms of life were over, a woman who had suffered so greatly that she had passed through to the other side. She was very quiet and very pale; her voice

seemed to have become monotonous; she seemed to be speaking and thinking mechanically.

"Jermyn," she said, "in the future it is quite certain that I shall not see very much more of you. To-night, then, I will tell you something that has been in my mind. I will tell you why I was terrified to death of Lord Lakenham; I will tell you why he transformed me into a madwoman that awful night in the billiard-room."

"Yes," Jermyn assented, "let me hear! Not that it makes any difference now, but between us, at least, let there be absolute truth."

"My success on the stage," Sybil continued, "was a fluke. For six months before my engagement at the Imperial Theatre, I was more or less half starved, and all that time Mary was terribly ill. The worst month of my life was when I was with a little stock company at Blackpool. You remember the page I cut out of the illustrated paper? Yes, I can see you remember. It was because that month at Blackpool was mentioned. It was before Lord Lakenham remembered. Blackpool would have brought it all back to him."

"You understand," Jermyn interrupted hoarsely, gripping at her hand,— "not a word unless it is your own wish to tell me?"

"It is my own wish," she assured him. "It is all very humiliating but it is not so terrible. It is my own wish to tell you the whole truth. Somehow, as I sit here," she went on, her eyes fixed upon the fire, "I seem to have lost all the ordinary feelings of life. Even if it were worse, I could tell you and feel very little. Lord Lakenham was at Blackpool. It was before he came into the title, but he was well known. He made

friends with the manager of our company. You know what such men are. Lord Lakenham was a little god to him. He was allowed to wander about our theatre as he liked. Unfortunately, he ignored everybody else but he took a fancy to me. It was the affair of a moment only with him — just one of these hateful impulses which come to a man of his type — but he pursued me all the time; I had seldom a moment's peace. I was half starved, and in the midst of it all the doctor told me that unless Mary was taken to London and operated upon, her spine would probably go wrong, she would never be able to stand up or run about like other girls; and, above all things, that I must give her nourishing food and plenty of it. All the time I felt my own strength going, and I was earning twenty-five shillings a week! I got into debt and Mary grew worse. I want to tell you this story in as few words as possible so I won't pile on the miseries. All the time Lord Lakenham was pursuing me. All the time, too, he was behaving with devilish cunning. When I had no idea where to look for a meal, he sent baskets of hothouse roses. When I was longing for beef-tea for Mary, he filled my sitting-room with mimosa — or would have done if I hadn't thrown it into the street. At last the end came. One Friday our manager wasn't there. The show was finished, there wasn't a penny for anybody. Lord Lakenham came to the rescue. He gave every one the money to get back to London and then he turned to me. What was there left? I borrowed fifty pounds from him and told him he could come to London in a fortnight and — and I would repay him."

For the first time her voice broke a little. Jermyn

had gone white. It seemed to him that a live hatred was blazing in his heart for a dead man.

"I went to London," she continued. "I put Mary into a private hospital. I paid — paid everything to start her there properly. There was a slight operation and in a few days she was a different child. Then that engagement at the Imperial Theatre came, by the wildest of accidents. When I opened the papers the next morning, I could have screamed. I was a success. The struggle was over. And behind it all there was — you know what. Then I made up my mind — I would not pay. I think that in my heart I never meant to pay and live. I left my rooms hurriedly and moved to another part of London. I took no notice of Lord Lakenham's letters or his telegrams. I hid. I had only one fear, and that was that he would come to the theatre and recognize me. I had changed my name, I altered the fashion of doing my hair, I altered my appearance as much as I possibly could. I dressed extravagantly and in a different style, on purpose. I tried to get as far away as I could from the white, half-starved little girl of Blackpool, in case I should see him anywhere. At first he wrote me continually. He even advertised in the theatrical papers. Then his father died, he came into the title and there was silence. He forgot, of course. I saw him several times with musical comedy young ladies, but I had passed out of his mind. I never met him face to face again until that day on the platform of Wickombe Annerley station when I came to visit you, and when I saw him there I very nearly turned round and ran back home again."

Jermyn took a long breath.

"It isn't so terrible, Sybil," he said quietly.

She was satisfied. They both, for a moment, reveled in a feeling of comparative content.

"In a way, it isn't," she confessed, "but I never sent him back the fifty pounds. I was afraid. I soon saved the money but I couldn't tell how to let him have it so that he couldn't trace the sender, so I gave it to the Actors' Benevolent Fund anonymously, with his initials."

He shook his head at her although his eyes were kind.

"Little girl, little girl," he said, "why didn't you tell me the whole story directly you arrived at Annerley? I could only see that you were terrified. It is all harmless enough. Life has its terrible side for some people, and fate chose to set you down in a hateful place. You couldn't have done anything else."

"Oh, I was a fool not to tell you!" Sybil confessed. "I wish you could have seen into my heart. It was you, dear Jermyn, of whom I was afraid. Can't you understand, too, that in those first days, in those first hours of that wonderful life, when you told me that you cared and all of a sudden everything was so changed, the thought of Lord Lakenham and his admiration was like a hateful, a hideous discord? You were so different, Jermyn, and mixed with all my love was just a little fear of you. I had always hoped that there were some few men in the world like you, but you were the first whom I had met, and I was afraid that when you heard of those ugly days, I should come toppling down in your thoughts. You know that I have been good, dear — you would believe that — but you have so much beautiful sentiment. I felt that even the thought of

those things and of Lord Lakenham would somehow destroy the beauty of those first few days."

"My dear," he murmured, "am I not human like other men? Could you really have thought me such an intolerable prig?"

"Oh, I was wrong — wrong!" she admitted sorrowfully. "I just went by the way I felt. I wouldn't think — I wouldn't use my brain. But, of course, it was a fallacy. Because we were living in a paradise, it was foolish to imagine that one could shut out the knowledge that many people in the world like Lord Lakenham live in pig-styes. But I was so happy to have found my little corner in life, and I was so terribly afraid of losing it."

She was sitting on the arm of his chair now, her hands clasped, her eyes fixed upon her interlocked fingers. He leaned over her, his fingers touched her shoulder. The room was going round. What business had men to plan their lives with their brains? Those might do that who were immune against the great forces of the world.

"Sybil," he whispered, "it's all terrible, but tonight, as I sat in my room, something came to me, some new thing, something I don't understand even now. Only it seemed so big and it made everything else seem so small. I couldn't keep away from you. I felt that I must tell you everything and tell you this. Sybil, I have promised nothing but my name, I will give nothing but my name. Sybil, for me all my days, for all the days of my life, there is no other woman but you!"

She shivered a little. He dropped on one knee by her side. The consciousness of her near presence set

him quivering like a boy, his arm half hesitatingly went around her waist.

"Dear," he went on, "look up. There isn't anybody else in the world I love, there isn't anything else I shall ever desire except you — your kisses, the feel of your arms, the light from your eyes. There is no one else with whom I could ever walk in the gardens of Paradise."

She was trembling violently. Her hand stole out as though to keep him away.

"Jermyn," she faltered, "we aren't like that — you and I. Oh, I have loved you so much because I know that you belong to the wonderful world, and it's the world I have struggled so hard to keep my little place in through all the troubles!"

"Should we lose it?" he demanded. "Once I should have answered very decidedly, but that was before I cared, before I knew what a wonderful thing love is, love which comes but once in a lifetime, which one knows is eternal. There isn't a thought comes now from my heart worth having, Sybil, that hasn't a little of you in it. There isn't a beautiful place I can look into without finding it empty unless you are there."

She turned her head; she looked at him wildly. Her lips were quivering, her eyes were full of the strange things.

"Jermyn!"

He caught her into his arms. His lips followed hers as her head sank back. Then they heard a little voice quite close, and a little clapping of hands.

"Hurrah!"

For a moment they remained as though turned to

stone. Slowly Sybil opened her eyes, raised her head and looked around. Mary was standing in the open doorway of the room, in her nightgown. She beamed upon them with the air of one who has made a delightful discovery.

"Oh, I am so glad that you two are friends again!" she exclaimed. "I thought I heard voices and I just peeped in to see. You didn't even hear me open the door. You silly people! I do believe that you've just made up a quarrel."

She came a little further into the room, helped herself to an apple from a dish, and sat and looked at them, swinging her slippered feet.

"I am so glad, really," she went on, "because, Jermyn, you will be able to look after Sybil, won't you, while I am away at boarding-school, and she won't be nearly so lonely then."

"Yes," Jermyn answered, "I shall be able to do that."

"Whatever made you come so late at night?" the child asked, selecting a place to bite at her apple.

"I came to bring back the key you gave me to take care of," Jermyn reminded her.

"What jokes!" Mary exclaimed, gleefully. "I didn't ask for it back, on purpose. I thought perhaps you'd have to come. But I am glad that you and Sybil are quite, quite friends again. You are, aren't you?"

"Yes, we are," he answered. "I think that we can promise her that, can't we, Sybil?"

She smiled at him without meeting his eyes.

"Of course, I expect I shall like boarding-school," Mary continued, "because I love having other girls to play with and talk to and that sort of thing, but the

one thing that spoiled it all was that I was so afraid that Sybil would be very lonely when I was gone. Now I shall feel quite, quite happy. Watch me, Jermyn!"

She threw the core of her apple into the heart of the fire and looked at him triumphantly.

"Don't you wish you could throw in as straight as that every time?" she asked. "Jermyn, are you going to see me off to-morrow from Victoria?"

"I will if I possibly can," he promised. "And I think —"

He glanced at the clock and stretched out his hand for his hat. Sybil's eyes suddenly met his and there was a wonderful look in them.

"We'll both let him out, Mary, and then I must put you to bed, dear," she said.

Jermyn laid the key upon the table. Mary locked her arms through his. Sybil walked gravely by his other side but when they reached the door she gave him both her hands. He stooped and kissed her upon the forehead.

"Dear," he whispered, "I understand — I know."

Then he kissed Mary and they closed the door upon him. Sybil stood quite still for a moment, listening to his departing footsteps. Then she caught Mary up in her arms, and her eyes were full of tears.

"You dear, funny old thing!" Mary exclaimed, as they turned back to the sitting-room. "All these days and days when you've been so miserable, you've never cried once, because I've watched to see; and now to-night when you are happy — you are happier, aren't you, Sybil dear? — look at those silly tears!"

Sybil smiled as she felt for her handkerchief.

"Life is like that sometimes, dear," she said.

CHAPTER XXIV

Jermyn received a somewhat imperative note from his fiancée the next afternoon, and in obedience to it he shortly presented himself in Grosvenor Street. Lucille welcomed him with a slight frown upon her beautiful face. She was dressed for the street and waiting alone in her little drawing-room.

"Of course you know," she told him, "that you are at least twenty minutes late. If I weren't conscious of having made a most superbly successful toilette, I should be quite annoyed. I have been spending the time looking at myself in the glass. Don't you think that you would like to send the car away and walk down Bond Street with me?"

She turned slowly around. She was wearing a wonderfully made gown of soft gray velvet with chinchilla trimming, a hat to match, and gray shoes and stockings.

"As an artist, now, my dear Jermyn, confess that you never saw a more beautiful effect," she went on, arranging a bunch of parma violets at the bosom of her gown. "If you were at all sensible of the obligations of your position, you would feel an amazing desire to embrace me upon the spot."

She turned to face him with her arms slightly extended. Jermyn, without moving, looked at her a little grimly.

"Unfortunately," he said, "I have never been able to understand the point of view of the man who is able to desire embraces from two women at the same time. I happen, as you know, to care for somebody else."

The brilliant, provocative look passed suddenly from her face. An angry light shot from her eyes.

"It is scarcely in the best of taste to remind me of it," she declared, quickly.

"My retort," he reminded her, "would be a little obvious."

She held out her hand.

"Please don't go on," she begged. "There will be time enough for us to quarrel after we are married. The car is waiting."

"I am sorry," Jermyn said; "I have just come to explain that I cannot go out with you this afternoon."

She stopped short on her way to the door.

"And why not?"

"I must go to the theatre," he answered. "We have been obliged to change the hour of our rehearsal to-day. Miss Cluley had to see her sister off to Brussels this morning. We are rehearsing at three o'clock instead of at eleven. I am on my way there now."

"Is your presence at every rehearsal necessary?"

"Perhaps not absolutely necessary," he replied. "On the other hand, it is a great pleasure to me and a compliment which I think I owe to my artists."

"Do you owe nothing to me?" she demanded. "I promised my cousins a week ago that you should go to Merchester House with me this afternoon."

"What I owe to you," he said gravely, "I shall do my best to pay."

She came over to him, laid her hands suddenly upon

his shoulders and smiled up into his face. She ignored his impassiveness. Her lips seemed almost to court his.

"Jermyn," she begged, "do not be angry with me. I know that I am foolish and jealous — sick with jealousy of Sybil Cluley. It is foolish of me because I know that you care for her just now and that you think you don't care for me, but if only I could make you believe it — you'll care for me, dear, long after you've forgotten her. She is just a little flash of moonshine. She hasn't much of a soul; she isn't much of a human being, anyway. Jermyn, you can take me with you, hand in hand, into worlds which would be all strange to her, worlds she could never even enter. Don't be foolish, please. Don't give away the best part of yourself to her while I am hungering for you. Don't come to me as a harsh, unpleasant duty and think of yourself as a martyr. Am I not as good-looking as she is, Jermyn? People would tell you so. I know I'm cleverer. She makes herself attractive because she has all the stage tricks. She can keep herself in the limelight all the time. It isn't a great gift to be able to act prettily, you know, Jermyn. You and I used to agree with Hazlitt. We never believed that the real fire ever burned in the mummer's heart."

Jermyn remained unmoved. He held his head even a little higher.

"Lucille," he said, "you treat me as though I were a boy, to be humored all the time into obedience to your whims. Don't you think it is a little foolish of you? I am thirty-one years old, you know. Sybil Cluley may be anything you like to call her. That is just your point of view. So far as I am concerned,

she is the only woman I have ever cared for; she is the only woman I ever shall care for."

Lucille shivered but she did not move away. She crept even a little closer to him, straining as though to take him into her arms, her eyes pleaded with him.

"Jermyn, all my life I have cared. I have always hoped and hoped that some day you might care a little, too. Do you blame me for still believing that you will? There isn't any one who could make you such a good wife as I shall. I wouldn't bind you to me if I didn't know this. Use a little common sense, dear. Sybil Cluley could never be your wife. You know that. So long as she lives there would always be the shadow."

"Even if I grant you that," he interrupted hoarsely, "what difference does it make? I care for her just the same. I am not likely to feel any the kinder towards you because I can't marry the only woman I care about."

"Dear, it's so impossible, and when things are really impossible, they generally die away, you know. Think, Jermyn — you used to be very proud of your people, dear; you know them all by name, those last twelve baronets, Lords of the Manor of Annerley — statesmen, diplomatists, soldiers and sailors. They married great ladies, every one of them."

"There is no woman who better deserves her place among them than Sybil Cluley," he answered.

Her eyes flashed; her lips curled a little.

"Even if you believed that," she retorted, "even if you could so far forget the obligations of your race as to put a little comedy actress up there among them, you still couldn't place a woman there whose hands were

red with the blood of one of your own relations. You couldn't do that, Jermyn."

He gave a little cry. She had raised her voice. He looked around the room, half terrified.

"You mustn't talk like that!" he exclaimed. "You can't tell — some one might have come in!"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"My dear Jermyn, the very intelligent gentleman at Scotland Yard who is now worrying over the Lakenham murder case, is as perfectly convinced in his own mind of the real culprit as you and I are. The only trouble is that he has no proofs. I am the only person who can be of any use to him. The only proofs that exist in the world are in my possession. I am the only person who could —"

She stopped short. Something in his face terrified her. She walked to the window and returned.

"We waste time," she remarked. "Now will you come with me, Jermyn?"

"I am due at the theatre," he told her coldly.

"I will drop you there, then," she replied. "At least you shall leave the house with me and in my car. I will not be treated as though I did not exist."

"You are very kind," he said. "If you will drop me at the theatre, I will accompany you, with great pleasure."

"I do it," she went on, as they took their places in the car and drove off, "under protest, mind. When one makes bargains with a person of honor, one doesn't trouble to put down every little condition. All the same, when I made that bargain with you, at the back of my mind there was always the conviction that if you accepted the situation at all, you would accept it

with its obligations — with its reasonable obligations, that is to say."

"I recognize no obligations," he declared. "I have nothing to offer that was not in the bond."

Her eyes flashed at him threateningly.

"Are you the only one to talk about the bond?" she demanded. "Why shouldn't I back out a little if I feel inclined? Do you think that I want only the cold shadow of your name, that I intend to be neglected by you all the time? Don't try me too far, Jermyn. I love you — I admit that — I love you and I can't love anybody else. I don't know why. You're a cold, strange sort of person. People call you clever but bloodless; they never forget that at Oxford you were a prig. Still, I care, but you know there are limits, there are other passions in the world beside love. Have you never heard of a woman who found revenge almost as beautiful? Remember I am half a Frenchwoman, and in my country the passions count for a great deal."

He weighed her words as she spoke them and in his heart he believed her. He knew quite well that she was capable of anything.

"Let me tell you this, Lucille," he remarked quietly. "If you ever did place Sybil's life in danger, do you know what I should do? I should give myself up. I should swear that it was I who had killed Aynesworth."

She laughed contemptuously.

"They wouldn't believe you. Besides, I should be there to swear you didn't."

"I think I can promise you," he said, "that I should make up a very plausible little case."

She leaned back amongst the cushions.

"Ah, well," she murmured, "we won't be so foolish, Jermyn. We won't quarrel any more. It is my fault really. Only I wish you would believe me when I tell you that if these days seem a little hard for you, the time will surely come when you won't regret them."

"All my life," he declared deliberately, "I shall regret the dissipation of the most beautiful dream I have ever conceived, the shattering of the most beautiful hopes I could ever have in life. These I shall regret always, even though Lady Annerley is the most admired woman in London and my house the best ordered."

"It is a challenge," she answered gayly. "I have had enough of being serious. We will discuss things no more; we will simply wait. . . . What dirty streets seem always to be collected around the backs of these theatres! Jump out, Jermyn. Go and train your little band of mummers to speak their words and play their little parts. I'll make the best apologies I can for you at Merchester House. Au revoir! Tell the man to stop first at *Lucie's*."

CHAPTER XXV

Jermyn found the little company upon the stage, awaiting his arrival. He shook hands with Sybil and there was the light of a new understanding in the smile and glance with which she welcomed him.

"So the little lady has gone?" he asked.

"She has gone," Sybil replied. "She went off quite comfortably and in high spirits. One of the governesses from the school was there to take her over."

"I tried so hard to come down myself," Jermyn explained, "but it was really a busy morning with me."

"I think, perhaps, it was just as well," Sybil assured him. "I suppose it really is silly to feel parting with her so much when one knows it is for her good, but I don't believe we have ever spent a night away from one another for six years."

"I am afraid you will miss her very much," he remarked.

"Yes, I shall always miss her," Sybil sighed. "Still, it was inevitable. Living in a tiny flat, with so few friends, must have been rather a poky life for a high-spirited child like that. One could see the change they made, even those few days at Annerley."

For the first time she spoke of them without shrinking. She seemed to carry herself with a new courage. Jermyn nodded understandingly.

"There will always be the holidays," he said.

"Brussels is really such an easy journey. If she cannot come to you, you will be able to run over to her."

The producer came down the stage.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, if you please."

Jermyn made his way into the front row of the stalls and down in the centre of the shrouded desert of empty seats. Very mechanically that afternoon he watched his work grow into shape, criticizing and making a few suggestions only when he was appealed to by the producer himself or one of the company. The play for him was Sybil, the stage was full of Sybil. When she was absent, he lost all interest. Once he smiled to himself with genuine amusement as he realized how wholly uninspired and halting his lines in places were when Sybil herself was not on the stage. His work had indeed been an offering to her. She had been his inspiration for longer, even, than he had imagined. Was it to end? Wasn't there really some middle way? Were men and women all alike in the face of a crisis of this sort? He tried to think of a single case of permanent and satisfactory friendship between a man and a woman placed as he and Sybil were, a friendship against which no one could whisper, a friendship which carried with it the justification of a real and convincing sincerity. He remembered hearing the subject once discussed. "If the man is capable, the woman isn't," the club cynic had remarked. "As a rule, everything goes on all right until the psychological moment arrives. It may be the man who precipitates it or it may be the woman. Flesh and blood haven't learned to resist it yet."

The atmosphere of the place was a little depressing. The sordid details of stagecraft began, in time, to irri-

tate him. It was with a sigh of relief that he heard the producer shut up his book and dismiss the company with his accustomed speech of farewell. He met Sybil in the wings and carried her off at once.

"I am going to take you to have some tea," he declared. "My own head aches even with sitting listening in that stuffy theatre, and I am sure you must be tired out. Afterwards, I shall walk part of the way home with you."

"I should love some tea," she confessed. "It's all waiting for me at home but I don't think I shall like my first meal without Mary a bit. Anyhow, I would like to put it off as long as possible."

They crossed the Haymarket and entered a tea-shop. Jermyn chose a quiet table and gave an order.

"You will miss her always, dear," he said; "yet, on the other hand, when you can bring yourself to think of it, it must be a joy to you to realize what you are able to do for her."

"It is indeed," she assented.

"Perhaps, in a way," he went on gently, "you may feel that she has already repaid you for some of your care. You know, Sybil, they say that the sanest of us get strange moments of madness. I fancy mine must have come last night. I don't think I was master of myself. I don't think I quite knew what I was doing. I seemed, somehow, to be possessed. Anyhow, Mary has exorcised that spirit. I want so much to see you to-day, if it is only for a few minutes, because I want you to feel that whatever happens, under any circumstances, Mary has brought me into the family as her big brother and you will have to let me play the part."

She turned a little towards him. Underneath the table her hand touched his and pressed it.

"I suppose," he continued, "one reason why we are not afraid of death is because we know that it is so utterly and entirely inevitable. It is not death or something else; it is death alone. I have thought over our position until my brain reels and I have come to the conclusion that that, too, is utterly inevitable. And so I am trying to drive that into my mind, to make use of all my philosophy and absolutely to make up my mind to the next best thing."

"Tell me," she asked, "does she — does the Duchesse de Sayers speak of me?"

"She has done so," Jermyn admitted. "She knows the truth, of course. She knows that I care for you. I have told her very plainly indeed that while life lasts I should care for no other woman. As yet she doesn't believe it, but in her way she is a reasonable woman. She makes no attempt to interfere, at any rate, with our friendship. She had better not."

Sybil caught at his hand suddenly. They were in a dark corner of the room and there were few people there. Her eyes were wet with tears.

"Jermyn, dear Jermyn," she exclaimed, with a little choke in her voice, "I am afraid of the loneliness of it all! Life seems to have changed so lately. Be my friend — do be my friend! We don't want to think of last night — of possible mistakes. That won't come again. You — you are so different. I am so lonely. You know the men we meet. I don't want to marry any of them. I just want to be let live, and to act and to think, and I want you to be the same to me always. But it's lonely, it's horribly lonely. I can't even make

friends with the women. They bring men, too, and it's always the same thing. If you were to go away, if you were to leave me altogether, I don't think — I don't think I could bear it!"

He held her hands firmly.

"Dear Sybil," he whispered, "it's a bargain. I am your friend now and always, your privileged, dear companion and friend. You can trust me."

She wiped her eyes and leaned back in her chair with a sigh of content. Their tea was set before them and she poured it out silently.

"Jermyn," she said presently, "let me tell you this. I feel happy to-day for the first time since — since that happened. Life seems somehow surer and safer again. So long as I have you, the you whom I love, somewhere in the background to trust, why, I am not so frightened. You won't go away for too long, will you?"

"I will not," he promised. "Nothing shall keep me away from England for more than a few weeks. There are plans which I have — but I won't talk about them just now."

"I do hope that she won't mind," Sybil went on. "Oh, I know you won't give me up altogether but I'd like her not to mind. In a way you can't be happy and satisfied unless you and she get on well together. I don't want to come between."

"It's her own risk," Jermyn declared. "I can't think myself how a marriage made like ours could ever be a successful one. I know it can never be successful. Still, I shall do my best now, I shall do my best always — up to a certain point."

She looked at him inquiringly. For a few moments

he said nothing, watching the people pass in and out of the place. Then he turned once more to his companion.

"Sybil," he said; "Sybil, there will always be this in my heart. Lucille is to be my wife and I shall give her exactly what the law demands, but between you and me there is something else. There is the love which must have in it always a spark of divinity, because for both of us it is leavened with self-sacrifice. That is how it will always be to me. Now we have finished with serious subjects. You must decide for yourself whether it shall be more muffins or some of those little cakes; or we can talk over what we are going to give Mary for a Christmas present; or shall we discuss exactly how you are going to say those few lines at the end of the second act, which Jameson and I can't agree about?"

She lifted her veil — there was no need to keep it down any longer.

"One at a time, please," she laughed. "To begin with, then, I want another muffin."

CHAPTER XXVI

In Bond Street the next morning Jermyn met Mr. Norden Smith. Mr. Norden Smith was attired in the height of fashion, with a large bunch of violets in his buttonhole. He looked with some surprise at Jermyn's blue serge suit and bowler hat. The two men shook hands and talked for a few minutes on casual subjects.

"Say, there's one thing that licks me about this country," Mr. Norden Smith remarked, "and that is the different sorts of advice every one gives you. I haven't been over on this side very much, as you know — in fact this is really my first trip that amounts to anything — and before I came they all told me that whatever I did, when I showed myself in the west-end of London I mustn't go about as we do in New York, but I must wear a silk hat and proper morning clothes. Yet here I am, doing as I was told, and there are you, a young Londoner who ought to know all about it, as comfortable as possible in a blue serge suit, a pot hat, a spotted blue tie and a colored collar."

Jermyn laughed.

"You must remember," he pointed out, "that I am half a Bohemian. I really have very little to do with the fashionable world. You mustn't go by me, anyway. As a rule, I think we dress according to the things we have to do. I have had to write for a couple

of hours this morning, then I am going to lunch alone at my club, and in the afternoon I shall be at the theatre, rehearsing a play. If I were going to pay calls upon friends, as no doubt you are, why, I dare-say I should have been wearing town clothes, too. How long are you up for?"

"Well, I'm not altogether sure," Mr. Norden Smith replied. "Anyway, when I've finished with London I shall be getting home again before very long. I have had a very pleasant tour over here and I have got through half of the business that brought me, most satisfactorily. By the by," he added, "you don't happen to know anything of a fellow-countryman of mine, a Mr. Chalmers — Aaron Chalmers they call him? He is better known over on this side, I think, than with us. He has spent the last fifteen years of his life in Europe, with only an occasional visit to New York. Chap not much older than you are, I should say."

"I know him quite well," Jermyn admitted, "or rather, perhaps I should say I know of him quite well. He has a large estate down in Hertfordshire. He is a member, too, of the club at which I am just going to lunch."

"You don't say so!" Mr. Norden Smith exclaimed, with interest. "Now I wonder whether you could put me in the way of finding him?"

Jermyn glanced at his watch.

"If he is in town at all," he said, "he will probably be at the club. Come along and have luncheon with me. If he isn't there, I can find out from some one where he is. He has a very large circle of friends. He goes down to the Riviera every season, I believe,

but it's too early for him to have made a move yet. Very good time, I should think, to catch him in town."

"Well, that's really very kind of you," Mr. Norden Smith declared. "If it's wholly agreeable to you, I should be delighted. I have nothing to do with myself just at present. I have bought a few books and curios; I have finished up my little cathedral tour, and, as I said just now, I've got through half the business that really brought me over. A week or two more and I think that I shall make tracks for home."

"It's a quarter to one now," Jermyn remarked. "I have been working all the morning and I am really out for a little exercise. If you're in no particular hurry, we might walk to the top of Bond Street and back again. I want to call at my shirt-maker's, and I suppose I am Englishman enough to love walking in this particular street."

"I am with you all the time," Mr. Norden Smith answered with alacrity, as they strolled off. "It's a commonplace, poky-looking little thoroughfare to any one that's been used to Fifth Avenue, but I am not going to say that it hasn't points. The women, for instance. Finest women in the world. Never saw anything like them. Such complexions! Gee! Here's a lovely woman coming now! What a carriage! What a figure!"

Jermyn smiled faintly.

"You ought to recognize her," he said. "That is the Duchesse de Sayers, to whom, by the by, I am engaged to be married."

"Now that's interesting," Mr. Norden Smith declared. "But I thought — I understood — I had an idea —"

They were face to face with Lucille now. She was dressed, as usual, in perfect taste, a very distinguished and distinctive figure. Some change seemed to have come over her during the last few steps. The brilliant smile with which she had welcomed them had passed from her face. She was looking steadily at Mr. Norden Smith.

"Let me assure you," Jermyn said, as they paused, "that Mr. Norden Smith isn't a nightmare. You look at him as though he might have come from the land of shadows. Seriously, you remember him, don't you, Lucille? Mr. Smith paid us one rather unfortunately timed visit to Annerley."

Lucille had recovered herself to some extent, and held out her fingers.

"Of course I remember Mr. Norden Smith," she assented. "Just for the moment, when I saw him with you, Jermyn, I am afraid I could only remember that he was associated in my mind with something very terrible. It was such an unexpected meeting, you see. I quite thought that you had gone back to the United States."

"I shall always regret, Duchess," the American replied, "that I shall have no opportunity to efface from your mind that unfortunate impression. It was an ill-timed visit of mine, beyond a doubt, but in its way, if I may be allowed to say so, it was as great a shock for me as for any of you."

"You must give us an opportunity," Jermyn declared, "of seeing something more of you next time you are over. We should both be delighted."

"I am sure that's very kind of you," Mr. Norden Smith answered. "In the meantime, I expect to be

on this side a week or so longer, at any rate, and it would give me a great deal of pleasure if you and the Duchess would do me the honor of dining with me at my hotel, the *Milan*, any evening to suit yourselves."

"You are very kind," Lucille said. "I am afraid, for the present, so far as I am concerned it would be quite impossible. Jermyn knows how full of engagements I am at this time of the year. Where are you going to now, Jermyn?"

"Up to my shirt-maker's," Jermyn replied. "Afterwards, we are going to lunch at the club."

For some reason or other, Lucille seemed scarcely pleased.

"I was just wondering," she remarked, "when I saw you coming, whether I shouldn't be able to get an invitation to the *Ritz*. I am not lunching anywhere to-day."

Jermyn shook his head.

"We want to see a friend of Norden Smith's," he explained,—"Chalmers. You know Aaron Chalmers, don't you?"

"Of course I do," Lucille admitted. "Is he in town?"

"We aren't sure," Jermyn told her. "If he is, we shall probably find him at the club. That is why I asked Mr. Norden Smith to lunch with me."

"In that case," Lucille said slowly, "I must not interfere, of course. We shall meet this evening, then, Jermyn."

She nodded to Mr. Norden Smith and passed on. Before she had gone a yard, however, she turned and called after them.

"Jermyn!"

Jermyn stepped back. Mr. Norden Smith remained on the edge of the pavement.

"What are you doing with that man?" she demanded quickly. "Why on earth did you speak to him at all? A most impossible person! Why should you take him to your club?"

"I do not find him an impossible person at all," Jermyn replied calmly. "He happened to present himself at Annerley at a very unfortunate time, but so far as he was concerned, he behaved most considerately. I find no fault with him. My invitation was only a matter of ordinary courtesy, such as I think we ought to extend to traveling Americans when we have an opportunity."

"It seems to me entirely unnecessary," she declared, in an undertone. "I dislike Mr. Norden Smith extremely. He belongs to that very ordinary type of person whom I am surprised that you should encourage."

Jermyn smiled.

"Well," he said, "I must try and preserve myself from any contamination, I suppose, but so far as the immediate present is concerned, my luncheon invitation has been given and accepted. I will, of course, be careful to make no arrangements for dining with him. Nothing else I can do for you?"

"Nothing," she answered, after a moment's hesitation. "If I were you, I shouldn't treat that man with too much confidence. I don't know what there is about him but he makes me shiver. Ah, here comes that stupid Lady Chalcote; I suppose I shall have to talk to her."

Jermyn rejoined his companion, who was waiting upon the curb.

"Say, I must congratulate you, Sir Jermyn," Mr. Norden Smith said heartily. "I am afraid I got sort of mixed up over this. I had an idea when I was down in your county that you were engaged to that charming little fair-haired lady, Miss Sybil Cluley."

Jermyn made no reply for a moment. Glancing into his face, Mr. Norden Smith suddenly realized that he had blundered. He vigorously launched into another subject.

"My mistake, no doubt. People gossip so in those small places. Now," he added, "I wonder if you could recommend me, Sir Jermyn, to a really good shirt-maker. You know what happens to us over in America if we buy dress shirts. I suppose it's our own fault. We don't take the trouble about clothes that we ought. You wouldn't care, I suppose, to —"

"You shall come in with me now," Jermyn suggested. "I think my people are as good as any. They will probably look after you all right."

"You're exactly the man I was looking for," Mr. Norden Smith declared.

They made some purchases together and reached Jermyn's club at about twenty minutes past one. When they were about half-way through a very excellent luncheon, Jermyn stopped a friend who was passing their table.

"Sidney," he said, "you know every one. Tell me, where is Chalmers?"

"Left for America this week," his friend replied, "on the *Lusitania*, I think."

Mr. Norden Smith was a quiet man, of quiet man-

ners and impassive countenance. Nevertheless, he spilt a little wine from the glass which he had been in the act of conveying to his lips. He leaned forward across the table. His eyes seemed to have sunk deeper into his head and his voice was scarcely pitched in its natural key.

"Gone to America — Aaron Chalmers?"

"That's so," Jermyn's friend assented lightly. "He was in here the other afternoon, I remember, when he received a cable. He threw it into the fire and laughed. Nothing very serious, I think. I imagined it was an invitation, or something of the sort. Anyway, off he went. He'll be back next month. I suppose I shall have to come and see you made into a respectable member of Society, Jermyn, old fellow," he went on. "You gave us quite a surprise."

"I shall be glad of your support," Jermyn answered.

His friend passed on. Mr. Norden Smith finished his luncheon in more silent mood. Directly they had reached the hall, he held out his hand.

"Sir Jermyn," he began, "I am exceedingly indebted to you for your hospitality. There is nothing I can do in return except to assure you that whenever you find yourself on my side of the water, well, I am your debtor. But there is just one thing I should like to remark. I don't want to allude to a painful subject at unnecessary length and I haven't spoken about it to-day because I guess you must be pretty well sick of it, but that was a terrible affair that happened down at your place when I was there — a terrible affair."

Jermyn sighed.

"Mr. Smith," he said, "you are right. I don't think we shall any of us get over the shock for some time."

"I wanted just to say this," Mr. Smith continued, emphatically. "I don't suppose it's likely that anything disagreeable to you could ever arise from it, but if things turned out that way, if things got somehow so that you needed help or advice, why, I want you to remember that I am a criminal lawyer of some repute on the other side, that I was on the spot, and that if I were forced to collect them, I've a few ideas of my own upon that night's work. Will you just send me a cable, Sir Jermyn, if anything goes wrong? Norden Smith, Manhattan Club, New York — that's all you'll need."

"I most certainly will," Jermyn promised him. "I tell you what I'd very much prefer, though, and that is that you came into the smoking-room with me now, and over that cigar and some very excellent brandy which I could find for you, told me just what those ideas of yours were."

Mr. Norden Smith shook his head.

"No," he said, "that wouldn't quite fit in. I'd rather not butt in on this affair at all, if I can help it. You see," he went on slowly, "justice, as the law of your country understands it, and the real Justice holding the scales between two human beings, isn't always quite the same thing. I guess I'll have nothing to say, unless, as I suggested just now, matters don't go altogether right. Here's to you, Sir Jermyn, and the best of luck!"

Jermyn walked with his guest to the steps and stood there while he departed. Mr. Norden Smith made no

further suggestion with reference to the proposed dinner-party. He stepped into a taxicab.

"The Cunard Steamship Company in Cockspur Street," he told the man. "Say, get along as quick as you can. I want to get there."

CHAPTER XXVII

Jermyn found an unexpected visitor awaiting him when he returned to his rooms a little later on that afternoon. A young man in deep mourning rose from the depths of his easy-chair. For a moment Jermyn was puzzled.

"Come, have I grown as much as that?" the visitor laughed. "I am Gerald Lakenham, you know."

"Why, of course," Jermyn replied. "I ought to have known you anywhere. You aren't a bit like poor Aynesworth, though. I thought you were on your way round the world."

"So I was," the young man answered. "I got this news at Rio and I came straight along back."

Jermyn nodded sympathetically.

"Of course. Must have been rather a knock for you."

"It was indeed," the young man admitted. "I can scarcely realize it, even now. Poor old Aynesworth! He wasn't half such a bad fellow, you know."

Jermyn was silent. There was no person in the world whom he wished less to discuss.

"I came along to see you," the new Marquis of Lakenham continued, "because I can't help feeling that it's all rather rot about old Aynesworth getting it in the neck like that and no one punished for it. Looks sort of slack, doesn't it?"

"I understand that the police have been making every effort," Jermyn remarked.

"Then I should say it was jolly well time they were helped," the young man declared. "It doesn't seem as though there could be a simpler case. Everybody and everything was there ready to their hands. I have just come from Scotland Yard at this moment, and if you ask me, I don't believe they have the slightest idea in their heads as to who did this thing."

"I don't think that any one has," Jermyn replied.

"I am not quite so sure of that," Gerald Lakenham dissented. "At any rate, it makes one feel rather fed up with the English detective system. I have made up my mind, anyhow, to see what I can do towards clearing the affair up. Aynesworth was my brother, after all, and as head of the house now I suppose it's up to me to do something."

"What steps do you propose to take?" Jermyn inquired.

"I have engaged an awfully clever private detective," the young man went on. "I want you, if you will, to be so good as to give him a clear run down at Annerley, and to let him interview you about the affair before he goes down."

Jermyn was silent for some little time.

"Do you mean to say that you have actually engaged this fellow?" he asked.

"I have engaged him all right," Gerald Lakenham answered. "He's guaranteed me an arrest within thirty days, and it seems to me that he knows his business."

"Did you consult any one before you took this step?"

"Not a soul. There isn't any one really, you see, except you. In fact, you're the first person I've talked it over with. Of course, the mater doesn't count. Women don't understand a matter of this sort."

"I have no confidence," Jermyn said quietly, "in private detectives."

"This fellow Grayson is awfully clever," his visitor assured him. "It was he who found out all about the Midland Bank robberies, and he has a little memorandum of all the best known thieves in Europe, compiled by himself. The police make use of him often, although, of course, they always take the credit. Jolly interesting fellow, too, to talk to."

"No doubt," Jermyn admitted, "and yet, I am afraid I shall have to say that I disapprove altogether of his employment in this case. I think the Scotland Yard people are doing everything that can be done, and any outside interference is only likely to make the matter more difficult for them."

"Up to the present," Gerald Lakenham remarked dryly, "everything that can be done means that nothing has been done at all. You know, I don't pretend to be overburdened with sentiment, and that sort of thing, but Aynesworth was my brother, and head of the family, and I don't feel like sitting still and leaving the mystery of his death unsolved."

"Perhaps," Jermyn replied thoughtfully, "if he were alive that is precisely what he would wish us to do."

The young man was impressed.

"I wonder," he said, "if you really believe that?"

"On the whole," Jermyn assured him, "I do. Aynesworth could have made a statement, if he had

chosen to, before he died. He had several minutes of complete consciousness."

Gerald sat for a few moments with a frown upon his forehead. This was distinctly a disconcerting point of view and one which had not previously occurred to him.

"Have you any idea," he asked slowly, "whether there is any truth in the rumor that Sybil Cluley and Aynesworth had met before that time at your house?"

"No truth at all," Jermyn answered, decidedly. "Miss Cluley is a very charming and delightful young lady and she has nothing whatever to do with this terrible business. If the detective of whom you speak is going to cause her the least annoyance, I tell you frankly, Gerald, that I shall take steps to protect her."

"The fellow only wants to find out the truth," Gerald protested. "I don't suppose Miss Cluley objects to that. It's as much in her interests as any one's."

"I don't suppose any one whom we are likely to be interested in would not be immensely relieved," Jermyn said, "if only the truth could be discovered. At the same time, these fellows often do a lot of mischief going into matters which don't concern the case at all. I must admit that I have a strong prejudice against them. The Scotland Yard people may do their work slowly, but as a rule, if there's anything to be found out, they discover it in time."

"I'm sorry you don't approve," Gerald remarked, helping himself to one of the cigarettes which Jermyn had produced, "but I've turned Grayson loose on the job now, so I suppose he'll have to get along a bit. Shall you mind his asking you a few questions?"

"It depends very much upon what those questions are," Jermyn replied. "As I said before, I am not favorably disposed towards his class, nor am I in favor of his being employed in the present case."

"Well, he's outside in my car," Gerald said. "Perhaps you'd let him come in now and you can look him over. I want you, if you will, too, to give him a letter of introduction to Miss Cluley."

"I'll see him myself," Jermyn agreed. "I tell you frankly, Gerald, though, that I can't promise I'll do anything to help him interview Miss Cluley. She was my guest at the time that wretched affair happened; it was my fault entirely that she was brought into it, and she has already been bothered quite enough about it."

"I'll fetch the fellow in, anyway," Gerald decided. "You'll perhaps think more of him if you talk to him for a bit."

Grayson turned out to be a very inoffensive-looking person, scarcely older than Jermyn himself. He was quietly dressed, and his face was quite unnoticeable except for the occasional brilliancy of his deep-set gray eyes. He looked like a man of the middle classes — a traveler, perhaps, for a jewelry firm — neatly dressed, stolid, not in the least self-assertive, yet with sufficient self-assurance. Jermyn received him a little curtly and motioned him to a chair.

"Lord Lakenham has been telling me that he has engaged you to make some inquiries with reference to the murder of the late Marquis," Jermyn said. "I should like you to understand at once that I am strongly averse to the step which he has taken."

"I am sorry to hear that, sir," Grayson declared,

"very sorry indeed. Might I ask if the reasons are in any way personal?"

"Not at all," Jermyn admitted. "I never heard of you before. I simply have a prejudice against your profession. I believe in these cases being dealt with by the recognized authorities, and I think that if they are left to themselves they are generally successful."

"They don't seem to have got very far with the present matter, sir."

"They have a way of taking their time," Jermyn asserted. "I think they are quite right. To arrest a man prematurely is the worst mistake that can be made. I have heard of cases in which they watch the person whom they have known perfectly well to be guilty of a crime, for months before they have arrested him, waiting for the last link of evidence. I have heard, too, of amateurs who rush in, put people upon their guard, and generally make a hash of things."

"There is a great deal of sound common sense in your point of view, Sir Jermyn," Grayson admitted. "I am aware that my profession is an unpopular one and that there are many people who consider that we should be abolished. If Lord Lakenham is inclined to take your advice, I shall not stand in the way for a moment. I shall only require the small sum I have spent for out-pockets, and I will willingly drop the matter."

Gerald shook his head doubtfully.

"I don't think that I am quite inclined to consent to that," he decided. "What Sir Jermyn says may be all right, but I can call to mind several cases lately of serious crimes where no arrest whatever has been made.

So long as you go carefully, I don't see the least reason why you shouldn't have a try at this."

"I take it, then," Grayson inquired, "that your lordship is not at present disposed to rescind your instructions to me?"

"I am not," Gerald declared.

"In that case," Grayson proceeded briskly, "as I am here, will Sir Jermyn mind answering a few questions?"

"I don't know that I have any particular objection," Jermyn replied slowly, "at any rate so far as they concern myself and my own doings."

"There are so few people who could have committed this crime," Grayson said, "that one is rather inclined to take the possible persons, one by one, and analyze their relations with the deceased. I have acted to some small extent upon this."

"Indeed!" Jermyn remarked, dryly.

"I have carefully considered, for instance," Grayson told him, "your own relations with the late Marquis of Lakenham, and I have come to the conclusion, Sir Jermyn, that there was not, nor could there have been at any time, anything connected with them which might have caused bad blood between you two. I have put you, therefore, outside the case."

"You relieve me immensely," Jermyn assured him, satirically.

"I am not able," Grayson continued, unmoved, "to dismiss Miss Sybil Cluley from the case with the same facility."

Jermyn was suddenly quiet. The fingers of his right hand trembled a little and there was a dangerous light in his eyes.

"In the course of my investigations," Grayson went on, "I have discovered that the late Marquis of Lakenham and Miss Sybil Cluley, who met at your house as strangers, were in reality nothing of the sort."

"What the devil do you mean?" Jermyn demanded.

"Precisely what I say, sir," Grayson answered firmly. "Miss Sybil Cluley six years ago was acting in a stock company at Blackpool under the name of Miss May Marvis. The late Marquis was in Blackpool at the time, was friendly with the manager of that company, and was, without the shadow of a doubt, not only acquainted with but an admirer of Miss Cluley."

"Most interesting!" Jermyn murmured, in a voice dangerously low. "And from that you deduce?"

"At present I have deduced nothing," Grayson replied calmly. "At the same time, no one seems to have stumbled upon this fact before, and to my mind it throws an altogether new light upon the situation. Miss Cluley, at the time she knew the Marquis, was in exceedingly poor circumstances. The company with which she was connected came to grief at Blackpool, and she was left with the charge of her invalid sister. There is not the slightest doubt that his lordship at that time was an ardent admirer of Miss Cluley. Those are simple, incontrovertible facts. This unexpected meeting under your roof, Sir Jermyn, might well have proved embarrassing for the young lady."

"As a matter of fact," Jermyn declared, "it was nothing of the sort. This I can answer for, for I was in Miss Cluley's confidence. The acquaintance at Blackpool of which you have spoken, is a matter of common knowledge to those who were there at the time,

but let me tell you this, Mr. Grayson — Miss Cluley and her sister left Blackpool when the company was broken up, and never from that moment had she seen anything of Lord Lakenham until they met under my roof. I make a statement there which I defy you to disprove."

The detective listened and inclined his head slightly.

"My investigations as to what followed after Blackpool have yet to be made, Sir Jermyn," he said.

"You spoke of some questions," Jermyn reminded him.

"I have some questions, a few, which I should like to ask," Grayson confessed. "I should like to ask you, for instance, what were your general impressions as to the nature of the terms existing between Miss Cluley and the deceased?"

"They met as fellow guests under my roof," Jermyn replied, "and without any recognition of that previous acquaintance, which, I may tell you, was a great deal slighter than you have hinted. Miss Cluley recalled it and mentioned it to me. Lord Lakenham never went further than to say that he believed they had met before. They were perfectly civil to one another and that was all. I don't suppose that they exchanged a hundred words all the time, nor half a dozen sentences alone, up to the night of the accident. We were a small party and we were generally all together, except when Miss Cluley and I were engaged reading the play which I have been preparing for her."

"Is it a fact," Grayson continued, "that Miss Sybil Cluley endeavored to obtain admission to the Marquis' chamber on the night of his death?"

"It is very possible that she went there to inquire,"

Jermyn answered. "We all did at various times during the night. There was no sleep for any one."

"Miss Sybil Cluley states that she left the Marquis of Lakenham alone in the billiard-room because of a headache," Grayson went on. "Had she complained to any one of feeling unwell?"

"Several times, and to several people," Jermyn assured him. "The reason she refused to play bridge and started that unfortunate game of billiards at all, was because she did not feel equal to anything which made any demands upon her."

Grayson was looking out of the window steadily. At this juncture he slowly turned his head and looked Jermyn full in the face.

"Is it true, Sir Jermyn," he asked, "that you announced your engagement to Miss Sybil Cluley at Annerley Court on the day before the murder, that subsequently the announcement was retracted, and that you are now about to be married to another lady?"

"You make free with my concerns," Jermyn replied, his voice trembling with anger. "What you say has some truth in it, but the engagement between Miss Cluley and myself was never confirmed. She is too devoted to the stage to care about marriage."

Grayson folded up his notebook and returned it to his pocket.

"I am afraid, Sir Jermyn," he said, "that your prejudice in favor of this young lady prevents your considering the case against her from an impartial point of view."

"If I have any prejudice in favor of her at all," Jermyn retorted, "it is because I know her to be incapable of hurting any one or anything. Her feel-

ings toward Lord Lakenham were simply feelings of good-tempered indifference. She started that game of billiards on the distinct understanding that she might leave off if she felt unwell."

"The weapon, I believe," Grayson inquired, "has never been found?"

"Never to my knowledge."

"Might I ask whether a visit from me would be permitted at Annerley Court?"

"It would not," Jermyn declared. "I am perfectly satisfied with the present conduct of the case, and I resent your interference in it."

Grayson rose.

"In that case, sir," he said, "you will permit me to retire."

"One moment, Grayson," Gerald called after him. "I am coming along."

"I will await you in the car, sir," Grayson answered.

The detective turned stolidly towards the door and made his way downstairs.

"You don't like the fellow," Gerald remarked.

Jermyn shrugged his shoulders.

"I haven't any real feelings about him, only I can't help thinking that his interference in this matter is unnecessary and annoying. His remarks about Miss Cluley, too, I look upon as sheer impertinence."

Gerald nodded and himself prepared to depart.

"That's all very well, Jermyn," he objected. "You think a great deal of Miss Cluley, evidently, and I daresay she's a jolly nice girl, but every word of what Grayson has said is, to my mind, sound common sense. Come, I challenge you, now. Tell me why you were engaged to Miss Cluley the day before the murder, and

now you are going to marry the Duchesse de Sayers?"

"The matter is entirely a private one," Jermyn replied. "You know very well that Lucille and I have been the greatest friends all our lives. Our marriage has been spoken of more than once."

"I wonder if you are shielding that girl, Jermyn?" Gerald asked suddenly.

Jermyn never flinched.

"You don't know Miss Cluley, Gerald, or you wouldn't ask such a question."

Gerald smiled as he turned away.

"I must confess," he declared, with a little sigh, "that there have been times when I have wished that I did, and not very long ago. She does look the most delightful person on the stage, and quite, as you say, as though she wouldn't hurt a fly. . . . Well, so long, old fellow. I can see that you are not on our side. We must do the best we can without you."

CHAPTER XXVIII

Ten minutes after his visitor had departed, Jermyn was ringing the bell at the door of Lucille's house in Grosvenor Street. There was a brief colloquy between the butler and a French maid, and after a very short delay Jermyn was taken upstairs into a little boudoir. Madame la Duchesse, the maid announced, was in the hands of the dressmaker, but monsieur should be kept waiting only a very few minutes. Almost as she departed, Lucille swept into the room from her adjoining bedchamber, dressed in a wonderful creation of green velvet and lace.

"You are just in time, my dear Jermyn," she declared. "How glad I am to see you! Madame Lucie has brought some of my dresses round herself, and we cannot decide about the length of this jacket. You are a man and therefore you know nothing about it; therefore, you ought to be able to judge precisely what is correct. Shall it be just as it is or two inches longer?"

"Two inches longer," Jermyn replied, without hesitation. "And, Lucille, I want just a word with you, at once."

She closed the communicating door.

"Well, I am here," she pointed out. "I can assure you that you are the only person whom I should receive under such conditions."

"Do you know anything of a man named Grayson? Has he been to see you?"

Lucille assented.

"He called a few minutes ago with a note from Gerald. I was going to tell you about it this evening."

"And you?" he asked swiftly.

"I declined to receive him. Isn't that what you would have wished?"

"Entirely," Jermyn replied, in a tone of relief. "You did not see him at all, then?"

"Certainly not. I have made a bargain and I mean to keep to it, in the spirit as well as the letter. I have no information to give him."

"Gerald has come back full of this matter," Jermyn went on, "and he's got it into his head that Scotland Yard are apathetic about it. He's gone to this man Grayson and the fellow actually admits openly that he suspects Sybil. He dared to ask me questions. He showed me quite clearly the line his investigations were going to take."

"Jermyn," she said calmly, "I am the only person who can bring this thing home to Sybil Cluley. My word is passed to you and Sybil Cluley is safe. I suppose, in your ungallant way," she added, making a little grimace at him, "you would say that you were paying the price."

"I am paying the price!" he declared, passionately. "You know that I am! I love Sybil Cluley. Every day my feeling for her grows stronger. It is indeed a price that I am paying and that is what sometimes makes my blood run cold. If it should be in vain!"

"There is no fear of that," Lucille assured him. "This man may suspect, as any one who knew a few

ordinary facts which I presume he has collected, certainly would suspect. What do his suspicions amount to? Nothing at all. There are hundreds of people who Scotland Yard know perfectly well are guilty of various crimes, but they'll go free all their days for want of a little evidence. The only evidence against Sybil Cluley is in my possession, and you have bought my silence. I will admit at once, if you like, that I could hang her. I could! It is easily within my power. Yet you need not have a moment's fear. She will be as free in twenty years' time as she is to-day."

Jermyn was walking restlessly up and down the little room. Its very luxury, its voluptuous air of femininity, seemed somehow to offend him. He felt the toils coming nearer!

"Sometimes," he said, "I think that we have made a huge mistake, all of us. For if Sybil really did this —"

"*If* Sybil really did this!" Lucille interrupted, mockingly.

"Leave the 'if' out, then," Jermyn continued. "Let us say that Sybil did it. She was driven to it, she was mad, the brute provoked her. I respect her for it. I know the story of their former acquaintance. I know the sort of man Aynesworth was. I can guess what passed between them in the billiard-room. In a moment of anger she may have fired that shot. I don't believe that any jury in England who knew the facts of the case would treat her severely."

Lucille laughed contemptuously.

"My dear Jermyn," she said, "we are not in France or in America. There are no unwritten laws here.

The man or woman who takes life pays for it according to the old biblical law. Our juries are not swayed by sentiment and hysterics, nor our judges by a pretty woman's tears. Sybil Cluley did well to conceal her guilt, and you have done well to buy her immunity. Only, Jermyn," she added, coming a little closer to him, "I do wish that you didn't think the price was such a terrible one. Do you believe that there are many men who would feel as you do?"

He stood and looked at her. She took his hand.

"I don't count them," she went on, with a little smile at the corners of her lips, "but I must have had at least twenty offers of marriage within the last few months. Do you know, I wonder, that I am very rich, that my name is a famous one, that I am supposed to be beautiful, supposed to wear my clothes well, to have a personality? I could have been a duchess again in France, a princess in Germany, a marchioness here, or the wife of one of your greatest Ministers. Yet here I am, almost a suppliant at your hands. You aren't so rich as those other men, Jermyn; you aren't even as good-looking as some of them. You are clever in your way but you are very narrow; you are full of prejudices; you are only half educated. Yet I want you, and I want you to care. Some day you will, but I hate to think of the time, even though it be only months, before you will care."

"What if it were a lifetime?" he asked. "What if I were never to care at all? Narrow, you call me; half educated; full of prejudices. Perhaps I am, according to the modern standard, but there are things that go with that. We Annerleys are a faithful lot to our womankind, and for all your disdain of her, I have

never met any woman in the world but Sybil Cluley who counts to me."

Lucille half closed her eyes. Her head was thrown proudly back. One saw that she was suffering.

"A moon-faced chit," she muttered, "paid to play antics upon the stage for the amusement of her betters! Jermyn, I can understand the weak-kneed, hobbledehoy sons of our decent people going and throwing themselves away upon these stage puppets, but when a man like you, with brains, who should know what women really are, what race counts for, what it means to posterity, goes moonstruck about a little actress and wants to marry her, you make me feel inclined to wonder, after all, whether I shouldn't do the kindest thing if I turned you out of my house and rang up Scotland Yard on that telephone. . . . No, I won't go on," she added. "I don't mean this, of course, but don't talk to me of Sybil Cluley, if you can help it. Presently I hope you will understand my point of view. And now, if you don't mind, you must run away, please. We shall meet later on. Where is it we are dining? I forget for the moment but I suppose we both have it down."

"At the Rochesters'," Jermyn reminded her.

"Of course! Dear old-fashioned people, Florence's father and mother, who will see that you take me in to dinner, and put us side by side, and nod and smile all the time as though an engagement were some sort of peculiarly humorous situation devised for their entertainment. Well, Jermyn, if you have nothing more to say to me about this, we can have a chat about other things then. But so far as my side of the bargain is concerned, you needn't be afraid. I shall keep it. Sybil Cluley is safe and will remain safe, if my silence

has anything to do with it. She would be safe if my intervention could save her."

Jermyn went restlessly out into the street. Lucille was right. He had been a fool to suspect her. He made his way to the theatre on the chance of seeing Sybil there, although it was not a regular rehearsal afternoon. He found her going through a portion of the last act with her leading man. She appealed to him at once about a rendering of her part, and he sat in the stalls of the gloomy, unlit auditorium, listening, striving to keep his mind upon the disputed psychological question of her attitude towards the man whom, notwithstanding his faithlessness, she loved. When he had given his decision, he returned to the stage.

"I shall just have time," he said, "to drive you home."

"You are getting me into frightfully extravagant habits," she declared. "Whatever shall I do, I wonder, when I have to look after myself all the time?"

He was silent. He had not yet arrived at the stage in their relations when he could listen to such speeches unmoved. They stepped out into the street and he sent a boy for a taxicab. At that moment Grayson went strolling by. Jermyn excused himself with a muttered word and crossed the road. He accosted Grayson with little ceremony.

"Look here," he began, "you remember me?"

"Perfectly, Sir Jermyn," Grayson replied.

Jermyn held him by the arm; the man was powerless to move.

"Listen," he continued fiercely, "you can pursue your dirty work when and how you like, but if you make yourself in any way obnoxious to the young lady whom

I presume you are here to watch, I shall take you by the scruff of the neck, law or no law, and thrash you till you howl for mercy. I don't know what the devil men like you are allowed to go about for, poking your noses into other people's business, raking up the ashes of dead miseries. The law can look after her own children and her own sinners. You vermin, trying to bring about a man or a woman's ruin for the sake of your fees, ought to be stamped out of existence. You understand me? I am in earnest."

"I can feel that you are in earnest, Sir Jermyn," Grayson remarked, holding his arm. "I will not argue with you. I can reply only that I have accepted a certain commission from the Marquis of Lakenham, and so far as I am able I shall do my duty, regardless of whom it may affect."

"Then you are warned," Jermyn exclaimed fiercely, "for if it be in the middle of Pall Mall, with a dozen policemen within call, the first time I come across you I'll beat you till you can't breathe, if I find you making yourself objectionable to that lady over there. So now you know. Earn your money if you can, but remember!"

Jermyn recrossed the street. The taxicab was standing by the curb. He handed Sybil in and seated himself by her side, white-hot with anger.

"My dear Jermyn!" she cried.

"Sybil, I am a fool," he admitted. "I can't help it. That ass of a young Lakenham is employing a private detective — that's the whole truth."

She was suddenly frightened.

"You don't think that he'll find out anything, do you?" she asked, catching at his hand.

He drew her fingers firmly into his.

"My dear," he declared, "there isn't the slightest fear. There is not, nor ever will be, any evidence forthcoming sufficient to justify the arrest of any living person for killing Lakenham. That I know to be a fact. It's the annoyance of the thing which I feel — nothing else. I hate that slimy sort of person, wandering about with his nose to the ground, planning the destruction of a human being. . . . You see," he went on, in a moment or two, "I've got over the horror of it all. I always was a little of a philosopher, you know, and if ever there was a man who deserved to die, it was Lakenham. I am sorry, but he's dead, and he's met the fate he's gone about the world asking for, for years. That's how I look at it. It may seem callous. You may not agree with me. You may feel a little more sentiment about it. But he's dead and there's an end of it. That's my attitude."

She sat by his side, quite silent.

"I am sorry about this detective," she said, "but you are right, of course. It isn't of any serious moment. I shan't worry. If he comes to me and asks questions, well, you can guess what will happen. Presently it will all simmer down, I suppose."

"I'm sick of the newspapers and the way they've piled it on about this affair," Jermyn continued. "Just at present I'm feeling sublimely egotistical. To me the tragedy of Aynesworth's death is nothing like the tragedy of my taking another woman to be my wife. As the days grow nearer, the thing rises up before me like a great threatening shadow. I can't look beyond a fortnight to-morrow. I can't realize any future for myself as the husband of Lucille."

She shivered slightly, but she kept her voice steady.

"And yet, dear," she reminded him, "not so very long ago you used to say that a man's real life was outside the ties of his womankind."

"Thank you for reminding me of it," he cried swiftly. "There alone is where my hope lies. There are plenty of others, especially in our world, married, who see just about as much of their wives as they do of their chefs. Very well. Life is still full of the big things. There's the work. I have an idea for a long voyage — China, perhaps. Egypt isn't altogether played out for any one with a trick of writing. This is all in the future, of course. And there's your next play. I am your dramatist for life, mind, even when you have your own theatre, even though you should have an actor-manager for a husband."

She turned away.

"I don't think, dear," she said, "that I shall marry. However, one can never tell. Here we are, you see. I am not going to ask you in to-night. I have to go to a woman's dinner at the Lyceum Club and I want to make a few notes. Fancy saying things about the stage! Doesn't it seem absurd? I ought to have asked you to have written out my speech for me. And don't worry about that man. I don't think that, starting as late as he has done, he is likely to find out much that Scotland Yard hasn't found out long ago." . . .

Jermyn returned to his rooms, somehow or other a little light-hearted. He got through his dinner-party better than he had expected and he left Lucille upon her doorstep with blank disregard of her little unspoken invitation. Then he called in at the club and strolled into the smoking-room. He was still on the

threshold of the room, however, when he heard a fragment of conversation from the depths of two easy-chairs, which brought him to a standstill.

"Seen the papers to-night, Roland? The *Star* says that an arrest will be made in the Lakenham murder case within the next twenty-four hours. Some new information has come into the hands of the police."

"About time, too," another voice grumbled. "The police never had a simpler case put into their hands. I could have solved that little mystery for them."

Jermyn came forward into the room. One of the two speakers quickly ordered a whisky-and-soda; the other plunged into his evening paper. Jermyn, however, nodded amiably at both of them.

"No need to shut up because I came along, old chap," he said to one of the men, whom he knew well. "I only hope that what you say is true. Personally, I don't believe it. I am afraid, somehow, that the moment has gone by. I don't believe that the person who murdered poor Aynesworth will ever be discovered now."

It was the first time Jermyn had joined in any of the little discussions concerning the affair. His friend, the Honorable Holland Rorke, who was to be his best man, silently handed him up the paper. There was a little paragraph of only three lines:

> "At the moment of going to press, we have received information of a confidential nature, to the effect that an arrest will be made in the Lakenham murder case within the next twenty-four hours."

Jermyn shook his head as he handed back the paper. "I only wish I could believe it," he declared.

CHAPTER XXIX

Notwithstanding that momentous announcement, the twenty-four hours passed without an arrest. Other days followed. There was a period of dramatic inaction. The little paragraph in the paper was followed by others. People whispered at the clubs about a great surprise. Still nothing happened. Then Gerald called upon Jermyn at his rooms one evening. Jermyn was making a few last arrangements. His trunks, all packed, stood in the hall. On the following afternoon he was to be married, and after the reception he and Lucille were to leave for Rome.

Gerald came in a little hesitatingly but Jermyn was glad enough to see him.

"Pretty near the end of your bachelor career at last, then, Jermyn," the young man remarked, stretching himself out in an easy-chair. "You've kept out of it pretty well, too. Thirty-two next birthday, I see you are. Can't think how you've managed it. I'm twenty-four and I very nearly came to grief last night at the Manninghams'. I'm too susceptible, you know, Jermyn. I wish I could take something to keep me off the books till I was — say, thirty."

"Try travel," Jermyn suggested.

"It's too jolly interesting at home," Gerald objected. "I am dead nuts on shooting, as you know, and then the hunting — November at Melton — gor-

geous! I have never owned more than a couple of gees in my life, remember. Then there's the lease of that salmon river runs for another three years yet. I've never caught any really big fish, and old Manningham was telling me yesterday that he never had such sport in his life as he had up there with poor old Aynesworth, last spring."

Jermyn smiled.

"Well," he said, "even if you should have the misfortune to be lured into an early matrimonial pitfall, sport remains, doesn't it? There will be still your shooting and your hunting and your fishing."

The young man nodded.

"That's true enough," he agreed. "That's one consolation, anyway. You know, Jermyn," he went on, "I can't come to your wedding to-morrow, can I?"

"Of course you can't," Jermyn replied. "I quite understand that."

"I shall look in at the reception just to say good-by," Gerald continued, "but it's only just inside two months. Aynesworth was only a sort of second cousin of yours, you see, whereas he was my own brother."

"You are quite right," Jermyn assured him. "Our own wedding would have been postponed longer still but for certain circumstances. As it is, it is going to be very quiet. No function of any sort."

"I thought I'd like to look you up for a minute or two," Gerald said, "before you went. I saw Grayson this morning. He told me that he had reached a point in his investigations when he was absolutely convinced in his own mind that he could put his finger upon the guilty party. He waits only for one slight piece of evidence."

"Did he mention the name," Jermyn asked, "of the guilty party?"

"He did," Germyn admitted.

"Am I to know?"

"Grayson was very anxious that I shouldn't tell you," Gerald replied. "Seems afraid of you for some reason or another. I don't believe in that sort of thing myself. Blood is thicker than water, and a fellow like that doesn't, of course, understand how we feel. I am sure that you only want the truth to prevail, and all that. Grayson is practically convinced that Aynesworth was shot by Miss Sybil Cluley."

Jermyn was so prepared that he was not even agitated.

"Of course," he said, a little wearily, "there isn't a man in London who has read the case who hasn't at some time or another suggested that either I or Miss Sybil Cluley committed the murder. You see, as a matter of fact we didn't, Gerald. That is why this wonderful discovery of Mr. Grayson's leaves me cold. That is why I hated to have you employ him. These fellows are never really any good. They simply walk along the obvious path and choose the most obvious person as a butt for their suspicions. Miss Sybil Cluley never fired off a pistol in her life. She doesn't know how. Besides that, remember, she had no quarrel with Aynesworth."

"There was that little bit of her past in which Aynesworth seems to have become mixed up," Gerald reminded him.

"Absolutely innocent; absolutely unimportant," Jermyn declared warmly. "I know it off by heart. I knew it all the time. There was no harm that Aynes-

worth could do Sybil. He was, as a matter of fact, her warm admirer, and paid her continual attentions that night at dinner-time. They were excellent friends when we left them, and it was quite impossible that any cause of disagreement of so serious a nature could have sprung up during those few minutes."

Gerald nodded.

"Well," he said, "that sounds all right. Personally, I know nothing of Miss Sybil Cluley except that she's a thundering good-looking girl, and I'd much rather think that it was any one else."

"I wish you'd take the affair out of the fellow's hands," Jermyn begged. "You know, I'm leaving England for some time, to-morrow, and I must confess that it sits like a black cloud over me to think that at any moment I may hear that a young lady for whom I have the sincerest admiration and esteem, who was my guest at the time this thing happened, and who, but for certain circumstances, would have been my wife, is in danger of being annoyed by these absurd charges. I feel my responsibility as host. If it had not been for my very pressing invitation, Miss Cluley would never have come to Annerley."

"I can't take it out of his hands now," Gerald regretted. "The fellow's worked like a brick and I have given him my promise. He's frightfully keen over the matter and he's got something up his sleeve that he hasn't even told me. He has collected all his evidence in a perfectly justifiable and decent sort of way. He hasn't bothered Miss Cluley at all — in fact, he hasn't really mentioned her name to me. I only put two and two together myself when I told you that she is, without a doubt, the person whom he is going for."

Jermyn sat quite still for some time, looking into the fire.

"I am afraid you're a bit hit over all this, old chap," Gerald remarked. "I am sorry. I feel for you very much indeed. But, you see, right behind it all there was poor old Aynesworth, my own brother, having the devil of a good time, a decent fellow, in his way, even if he was a bit selfish and inclined to go the pace a bit. I can stand a man being killed in a fight, but hang it all, a cold-blooded murder, without a chance! I can't stick it, Jermyn. If I had a grudge against any man or any living being in the world, so that I wanted their lives, however much they may have been in the wrong, I'd want to give them a show. I'd rather stick a weapon of some sort in their hands and fight it out with them. Wouldn't you? You wouldn't go and take their life without giving them a chance? It's a dog's death and I can't bring myself to sympathize for one moment with a murderer, whatever the provocation."

"You are right, of course," Jermyn admitted. "Things must go their own way, Gerald. On the other hand, if anything happens to Miss Cluley, I shall come back to England at once. Every farthing I have in the world, if it is necessary, will be spent in her defense. And there's something else, Gerald. If I find that that fellow Grayson has been concocting any evidence — those creatures aren't above it, you know — I'll thrash him within an inch of his life!"

Gerald rose slowly to his feet.

"My dear fellow," he declared, "if I thought Grayson capable of anything of the sort, I wouldn't employ him. As regards the rest, you make me wonder some-

times," he went on, as he stretched out his hand for his gloves and stick, "what half the rest of London are wondering — why you didn't marry Sybil Cluley?"

Jermyn's features were suddenly of stone.

"Miss Cluley was indisposed to leave the stage, for one thing," he replied. "We came to the conclusion that we had been a little hasty. Nothing that passed, though," he added, "has interfered in the slightest degree with the profound respect and esteem which I have for her."

Gerald nodded.

"Well," he said, "it's not my business. Good luck to you, Jermyn! Sorry I can't be there to see you turned off. I've sent my bit of an offering to Lucille. Look Cyril up in Rome, won't you — he's having a fairly good time at the Embassy. And so long."

Jermyn threw himself into his easy-chair. As he had opened the door to show Gerald out, he had caught sight once more of his trunks. His servants had come in with some casual inquiry about the journey. Perhaps for the first time he realized that the days of his respite had passed, that only the few short hours of night lay between him and his marriage to Lucille. It was for this, then, that in a world which seemed to have deliberately eschewed them, he had held fast to certain primitive and exceedingly unfashionable ideals of masculine conduct which he had brought with him from Oxford! He was, after all, only as other men. He had resisted a hundred temptations; he had fought with himself the long, silent battles which go to the making of character. He had waved away the cup which had so often been raised to his lips, to give himself in the end, unwillingly and in humiliation, to a woman for

whom he had no love. It was a queer end to a strenuous celibacy! . . . He looked into the fire and he wondered whether Sybil, too, sat in that little room of hers, thinking of these passing hours. Somehow or other, notwithstanding his hatred of Grayson, notwithstanding Gerald's warning, even, the terror which had been with him during the last few weeks was becoming all the time a less real thing. He believed implicitly in Lucille; he believed implicitly in that utter lack of evidence which must keep Sybil safe. And yet, what was there could save her from her own thoughts? What a horrible shadow over her young life! This was what his love had brought to her, love as pure and strong as any man could feel, love which, alas! stripped of all its joys, redolent only of pain, must dwell in his empty heart through all the years to come.

He rose restlessly from his place and threw open the window to let in the roar of the city. The silence of his room had depressed him miserably. The blended voices of the night maddened him. Almost he could fancy that he heard peals of mocking laughter, the laughter of the world if only they could know the truth. She sat alone, the woman whom he loved, and he, instead of being by her side, must spend this last evening in still more utter and complete solitude. At that moment he regretted himself. He craved even for that more complete paganism which, eliminated somehow from his heart during those earlier and strenuous days, had left him without the sympathy of so many of his fellow-creatures. He looked up at his gods and he hated them. For the first time he felt disposed to despise and even to ridicule his non-acceptance of the middle-class standards of his sex, which

kept him apart now from those whose sympathy and companionship might have made life an easier thing. There was no man to whom he could tell his troubles. There was no man in the world to whom he could speak of the pain which throbbed at his heart. There was no man who would understand, no friend's voice to tell him that he was doing well, that in the days to come he and she would rejoice. This was the price he was to pay!

CHAPTER XXX

Neither an earthquake nor a miracle happened. At half-past two on the following afternoon, Lucille and Jermyn passed down the red druggeted path, along the tented way, and, with the clashing of bells behind them, drove from the church where they had been married to the hotel in Hans Crescent where the reception was to be held. Lucille gripped her companion's hand and, leaning a little forward, glanced at him curiously.

"My dear Jermyn," she exclaimed, "it is indeed you who might be the bride to-day! You are so pale, and your eyes seem to see things so far off. Do, for the sake of my vanity, cultivate more the air of the happy bridegroom. Look at me."

He turned and obeyed her. At that very moment, half a score of journalists were writing that the most beautiful woman in London had just been married. There was, without a doubt, some truth in their words. Lucille was exquisite, more fascinating than ever with this touch of scarlet in her cheeks, this gleam of real excitement in her eyes.

"Kiss me, Jermyn," she whispered. "Let me see whether I can't bring just a shade of color into your cheeks."

He touched her lips with his own but drew back almost at once.

"Lucille," he said, "I shall do my best. Don't

treat me, though, as if I were a child, to be coaxed from ill-humors into good ones by kisses and sweetmeats. I have paid your price. Isn't that enough?"

"Not nearly enough," she murmured. "You are my husband now, indeed, as I always prayed that some day you might be, but there are other things, you know, which I have a right to expect from you besides your name. I want you to look as though you are glad I belong to you."

"I am no actor, but I will do my best," he promised. "I will do my best now and I will do my best always to make you happy, but if I fail, remember that it was your risk and not mine."

Arrived at the hotel, they separated, to meet again a few minutes later in the reception room. Already the guests were beginning to stream in. The quiet wedding had grown and grown. People had begged to be allowed just to look in, to shake hands with the bridegroom, to wish happiness to the bride. And all the time the carriages kept arriving. Jermyn, whose natural instincts were all courteous ones, moved continually about among his guests, returning now and then to Lucille's side. Every one spoke to him about her wonderful beauty. It was surely the one day of her life! She was brilliant, she said the right thing to every one, her attitude even towards Jermyn was perfect. Despite himself, she made him appear at his best. People began to remark that, notwithstanding a certain amount of gossip, this seemed likely to be a most successful match.

The rooms were almost filled when Jermyn, who was in the act of raising a glass to his lips to drink with an old friend, became suddenly rigid. He set the glass

down and, with a word of excuse, crossed the room to where a man was standing a little apart from the others, looking in upon the gay scene. He was dressed in conventional fashion, he wore even a white flower in his buttonhole, and a gray tie, but there was no mistaking Grayson.

"May I ask," Jermyn inquired, doing his best to speak calmly, "to what we are indebted for the pleasure of your presence here?"

Grayson faced his questioner with equanimity.

"Sir Jermyn," he replied, "I am here in the discharge of my duty. My investigations have carried me up to a certain point and beyond it. I am associated now with the law and I must ask you to respect my position."

"What the devil do you mean?" Jermyn demanded, in a low tone.

Grayson glanced around. They were on the edge of a little crowd of people and conversation was not easy.

"Sir Jermyn," he advised, "go back to your place and leave me alone. Within a few minutes you will know the solution of that mystery which I am afraid has brought unhappiness to a good many people."

"You mean to say," Jermyn persisted, "that you are going to make an arrest — an arrest here?"

"I am going to assist in that, beyond a doubt," Grayson told him.

"Among my guests?"

"Among your guests, Sir Jermyn."

For a moment the room seemed to swim. Jermyn looked around him wildly. That Sybil should find her way here seemed to him, of all impossible things in the world, the most impossible! Then came an inter-

ruption which it was impossible to ignore. The Duke of Rochester touched him on the shoulder.

"My dear Jermyn," he said, "as your father's oldest friend it is my privilege to come here to-day to drink a glass of wine with you and to wish you every happiness. I am an invalid and allowed to stay for only a short time. You will forgive me, therefore, I am sure, if I interrupt your conversation with this gentleman."

The small conventionalities of life often sweep aside the great tragedies. Jermyn walked side by side with the Duke to the buffet, around which so many groups were gathered together.

"I was your father's school and college friend," the Duke remarked, as they took their glasses of wine from the waiter. "I tipped you when you wore your first pair of trousers; I was at Lord's when you made your first century; I proposed your health the day you came of age. I have known Lucille, too, all her life. She is an exceedingly clever woman. If you are ambitious, Jermyn, and they tell me that you are, I know of no one who could make you a better wife. I drink to your happiness, I drink to the happiness of your married life. Ah, here comes Lucille! It is charming to be able to include her in my good wishes."

He held out his hands. Lucille greeted him with a delightful smile. There was a man by her side — clean-shaven, broad, good-looking in his way, with a dash of the transatlantic about his carriage. She kept the Duke with her right hand while she spoke to Jermyn.

"Jermyn," she said, "it was only the other day that I heard you mention the name of Mr. Aaron Chalmers.

I met him yesterday and asked him to come in and see us this afternoon. He would like to make your acquaintance."

"And to offer you," Mr. Chalmers declared, with a little bow, "my very heartiest congratulations. I cannot conceive the possibility of there being a happier man upon the face of this earth than the man who has the good fortune to be the husband of my dear friend, the Duchesse de Sayers."

"You are very kind," Jermyn murmured, as he shook hands. "I remember asking my wife whether she had seen anything of you lately, only the other day, because an acquaintance, a fellow-countryman of yours, by the by, asked me particularly where he could find you."

"Is that so?" Mr. Chalmers remarked, good-humoredly. "What was his name?"

"His name," Jermyn replied, "was Norden Smith."

Mr. Aaron Chalmers stopped in the middle of drinking his champagne. He looked fixedly at Jermyn. Then he drained the contents of the glass and set it down.

"Is Norden Smith over here now?" he inquired, in a completely altered tone.

"I don't think that he is," Jermyn answered. "It was a little over a fortnight ago that I met him in Bond Street. He lunched with me at my club and at his request I made some inquiries about your whereabouts. They told us that you were in the States. I have not seen Norden Smith since, but I have an idea that he intended leaving for New York a few days later."

Mr. Aaron Chalmers, although he had not regained

his former appearance of complacent good-humor, seemed to be somewhat relieved.

"Well," he declared, "I wish the fellow no harm, but I shall be very glad to think that he is going to stay there. Between you and me, Sir Jermyn, Mr. Norden Smith is somewhat of a crank. He has a particularly charming and attractive wife, whom I have the pleasure of knowing, but as regards Mr. Norden Smith himself, well, I should be just as well content to think that we were not going to meet again in this world. Do you know him intimately, may I ask?"

"Not in the least," Jermyn replied. "I only met him once before this time. He called to see me one night at Annerley. He was anxious to renew his acquaintance with Lord Lakenham, who he heard was staying with me."

"And did he?" Mr. Chalmers asked, in a very low tone.

"Unfortunately, no!" Jermyn answered. "Mr. Norden Smith arrived at Annerley Court only a very few minutes after a sad tragedy had happened there. You read, without a doubt, of the murder of Lord Lakenham? It took place, as you may remember, in my house."

Mr. Aaron Chalmers, for a strong man, seemed curiously emotional. He picked up his empty glass and held it to the waiter.

"Fill this quickly," he ordered.

The man obeyed him. The hand of Mr. Aaron Chalmers shook so that some of the wine was spilt upon the carpet. Mr. Chalmers made no apology. He lifted the glass to his lips and drained all of the wine that was left.

"Sir Jermyn," he remarked, "I am glad you have told me this. The man Norden Smith is a lunatic. He is one of those people who go about the world with a single weird, distorted idea. He ought to be locked up. He is one—"

Mr. Aaron Chalmers said no more. Such change as there had been in him before from the complacent man of the world whom Lucille had introduced to Jermyn, was nothing to the change which was apparent in him now. His jaw hung loose, his eyes were fixed and glazed, he was shaking like a frightened schoolboy. Then across the room with measured footsteps, also with a white flower in his buttonhole, came Mr. Norden Smith, and as fast as Mr. Norden Smith moved towards the bridegroom as though with the intention of congratulating him, so, only a little faster, came Mr. Grayson from his place on the outside of the circle.

"Sir Jermyn," Mr. Norden Smith declared, "I congratulate you. Give me your hand, sir."

Jermyn recognized his visitor with surprise.

"Norden Smith!" he exclaimed. "Why, your name was upon my lips only a moment ago. You are back again from America already, then? I am glad to see you."

Mr. Norden Smith wrung his hand.

"I trust," he said, "that I shall not in any way disturb the serenity of this function. I would gladly postpone a little matter I have on hand, but for the fact that I am afraid it has become one of urgency. Sir Jermyn, to-day you enter upon married life. Fifteen years ago I, too, was married. I have loved my wife every second of my days, with every thought of my brain, with every pulse of my body. Fate decreed that

my love should be unworthily given. A few months ago I made a discovery which has brought these gray hairs to my head, which brought tragedy to your peaceful home at Annerley, which brings tragedy even to your wedding breakfast. It was I who shot Lord Lakenham, it is I who at this minute am about to shoot Aaron Chalmers. These two men robbed me of my wife. Lord Lakenham has paid the penalty. Aaron Chalmers now pays it!"

It was an affair of a moment. Even as Grayson sprang upon him and another stranger from among the crowd threw an arm around him from the other side, the hand of Mr. Norden Smith flashed out. There was a little puff of smoke, a report, and Aaron Chalmers went backwards, a crumbled heap upon the floor. Mr. Norden Smith stood with the pistol still in his hand, gazing down upon the prostrate form with a smile of peculiar satisfaction.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, looking away as though with reluctance from the body of his enemy, "I offer you my heartfelt apologies. I represent a spectre at this feast, and yet, in a sense, there is meaning in my presence. I am one of those who believe in fidelity and who repay infidelity with death. That is my mission here. Perhaps you have drunk the health of your bride and bridegroom to-day. Perhaps you have spoken to them of the duties of married life. Here is a little background for your text. With the bullet which has entered that man's heart, I have repaid the broken vows of a wife whom I have loved as dearly as any of you have loved one another. It is my pleasure to pay whatever penalty the laws can inflict."

Notwithstanding the commotion, every word of Mr. Norden Smith's little speech was plainly audible. One or two of the men were bending over Chalmers, but the people mostly had fallen away, many of the women with their hands before their faces. A group of people, gathered at the buffet, stood as though transfixed, with their wineglasses still in their hands. Jermyn, with his fingers gripping Grayson's shoulders, was asking him questions in a low, fierce whisper. Mr. Norden Smith himself handed his weapon to the man in whose grip he was.

"Be careful," he enjoined. "There is still another barrel loaded. You see, I have not used it even for myself. I want the pleasure of the next few days, the pleasure of reflecting upon what I have done. My apologies, Sir Jermyn! Might I suggest, sir," he added to Grayson, "that you and your companion handcuff me and take me away at once, so that this little ceremony can proceed?"

He walked blithely to the door between his two guards. He left behind him a scene of complete and dramatic confusion. Two women had fainted; another was in hysterics. Many were looking about them in a vacant sort of way, as though they found it impossible to realize the tragedy of the whole proceeding. Across the heads of their guests, Lucille and Jermyn stood looking at one another!

CHAPTER XXXI

With the departure of Norden Smith, people seemed to recover from their stupefaction. With one accord they hastened to take their leave. In a very few moments there were left in the room only Lucille and Jermyn, Lucille's friend and bridal attendant — Lady Florence Effingham, and Jermyn's best man — the Honorable Holland Rorke. Neither Lucille nor Jermyn had spoken a word. It was Rorke who attacked the subject, first helping himself to a glass of champagne.

"After all, you know," he declared, "I am not sure that this ought not to be a relief to everybody. Frightfully dramatic and all that, and a terrible shock to you people it must have been, and I am sorry for poor old Chalmers, who wasn't such a bad sort, but when you come to think of it, it is rather a relief to have this matter of Lakenham's death straightened out."

"A very sensible point of view," Lady Florence agreed. "Of course, I think it was the worst possible taste of that man to come and make such a hateful scene here. I am sure I am shaking all over. The best thing we can do now, though, is to try and forget it. Come along, Lucille, it's time you changed your frock."

Lucille turned towards the door. Then Jermyn spoke for the first time.

"Lucille," he said, "before you go upstairs may I have one word with you?"

He pointed to the door of the anteroom. Lucille hesitated. Once more their eyes met and she began to tremble.

"Wouldn't it do," she ventured, "in the carriage or in the train? I am just a little shaken for the moment. I should be so glad to rest until the time came to start."

Jermyn's fingers still pointed toward the door.

"I am sorry," he replied. "I will not keep you for more than a minute or two."

Lucille had the air of one looking around her as though anxious to escape. There was no escape, however. Jermyn's voice was so quiet and yet so decided that neither of the other two interfered. Very slowly Lucille turned and crossed the room towards the inner chamber. Jermyn followed her and closed the door behind them.

"Lucille," he said, "I am waiting for your explanation."

She made her way to an easy-chair, groping her way with her hands as though she were in fear of falling. Then she threw herself into it and, leaning over the side, kept her head turned from him.

"I thought that Sybil Cluley did it," she declared. "I determined to make you believe that she did — it was better for you."

"Is that your explanation?" Jermyn asked.

She made no answer. Jermyn came a little nearer. He stood upon the hearthrug, looking down at her.

"Lucille," he continued, "I cannot bring myself to believe, even now, that you have stooped so low, that

you have acted so shameful a part. You say that you believed Sybil Cluley was guilty. To me you swore it. You have posed ever since as having saved her. You made me believe that but for you she would have been arrested. My God," he went on, his voice shaking for the first time, "you did more! You made me believe that she was guilty!"

Lucille kept her head down. She said nothing.

"Do you mean, then, that you have no further explanation to offer me than this?" Jermyn persisted. "You have induced me to go through this d — d ceremony by a trick! What do you expect to gain by it now? Do you imagine for a moment that I shall consider myself your husband?"

She looked up.

"You are my husband," she reminded him. "Nothing can alter that."

Jermyn's eyes suddenly caught flame.

"You wear my name," he cried brutally, "if that is any use to you! What else of me do you claim? My company? My protection? Rubbish! There isn't a woman upon the face of this earth, Lucille, today, whom I dislike and despise as I do you."

She sprang to her feet and stood before him, quivering. His words had stung through her fears. She was ready now to fight.

"You fool, Jermyn!" she exclaimed. "Can't you see that what I did, I did for your own sake as well as mine? I did nobody any harm. I just wanted to save you from making a miserable marriage. You're not one of those who go about the world with their eyes open. You're at home in your study, or surrounded with your books, or on the hilltops or in the

beautiful lonely places of the world, but when you come down into the market-place you're an idiot. Do you hear that — an idiot! You need a keeper all the time. Your very vision is distorted. You know about many things in life. You know the springs that govern human action. Your plays are wonderful pieces of geometrical psychology. But the real men and women of our days, whom one meets as one passes along, you know no more about, Jermyn, than the Arab who rides his camel across the desert. You, Jermyn Annerley, daring to tell us down at Annerley that you were going to marry a little girl from the theatre, a daughter, without a doubt, of some poor tradespeople, a girl who has had to struggle all through her youth to get engagements, making herself agreeable to all sorts and conditions of impossible people, living half the time in want, living always in the sort of way those people must. Yet you can sit in your study and you make a heroine come down to you from the skies, and you clothe her and make her beautiful, and you carry her with you in your brain and in your heart, and you wander out into that little bit of London you call the world and find this moon-faced chit, who can chant your speeches prettily and knows all the tricks of saying them, and you immediately shower upon her all the wealth of your fancy, you throw yourself at her feet — she, this little actress, is to be dressed in all those wonderful garments, and you won't see, you *won't* see that they never could fit. Oh, you fool, Jermyn! You fool! I haven't spoken a word about myself. It's as much for your own sake as for any one's that I have saved you from tying up your life unworthily."

"Have you finished?"

"Isn't it enough?" she demanded. "Well, I've spoken of her. Shall I tell you of myself, too? Haven't you heard it already? Look at me. I've told you about the other men. Well, I'll tell you about myself. A woman who is built as I am, Jermyn, loves only once. I have read as much poetry as you have, thought as many beautiful thoughts, kept my footsteps clean from the muddy places; but all the same I have lived in the world. That's the difference. The strings of life have pulled at me, they have kept my feet upon the earth, and I have measured men and speeches and gone serenely on, content to wait for the greater things. Jermyn, don't look at me as though I were some one far away. It is the one jewel of life which I offer to you, and I've kept it just as jealously as you have cherished your impossible fancies. Don't you feel it? Aren't you big enough to know it? I love you with all my heart and all my soul. I love you so that it was torture to me to sit at your table and watch you and that girl. I don't understand it; no one does understand these things. But, Jermyn, if love will make you happy, if love can keep you young, come here, come to me. There isn't anybody in the world can give you what I can give. There isn't as much love for you in the whole shallow heart of your little comedy actress as you can take from my lips now, always, every time you touch them. Jermyn!"

Her arms called to him, her lips, her eyes. In her tone had rung the triumphant consciousness of truth, overwhelming, self-convicting, truth which neither anticipates nor believes in denial. Even when she had finished, she did not for a moment realize her failure. Something in the artistic subconsciousness of the man

had leaped up, responsive to the fine quality of her words, to the compelling truth, the almost anguished appeal which burned in her sentences. The color had come into his cheeks; his eyes were glowing. It was a wonderful change. She had never seen Jermyn like this. He was human, after all. Surely she had succeeded! His tone, too, when he spoke, was different, was gentler, kinder.

"Lucille," he said, "very well. Now listen to me."

She moved towards him. Her bosom was rising and falling madly. Her lips were parted, her eyes implored him, her fingers sought for his shoulders.

"I don't want words," she begged, "I want you."

He gripped her wrists and held her from him or she would have been in his arms.

"Lucille," he continued, "thank yourself for what comes. You have awakened the brute in me and it is the brute who speaks. What do you expect? To buy me, a slave? To make me complacent with your caresses? Rubbish! If you are a woman, am I not a man? I've chosen my mate and I want her."

"But you are my husband!" Lucille called out. "You are my husband!"

"Much good may it do you!" he answered fiercely. "You have made me go through that wretched ceremony. Do you feel any different? Does it help you? Do you feel that you own me any the more? Think it over — you'll have time."

He turned towards the door. Her eyes were full of fear.

"Jermyn!" she cried. "You're not going to leave me?"

"What else?" he demanded. "Do you suppose I

am going honeymooning with you? I am going to find Sybil and tell her the truth. She shall choose. She shall make my future whatever it is to be, not you."

"You wouldn't dare!" Lucille muttered. "To-day you wouldn't dare to go to her!"

Jermyn took no notice. Already he had reached the door. He did not even look back. She almost flung herself upon him.

"Jermyn," she pleaded, "be merciful. Consider what will happen if you leave me like this. The carriage is ordered for an hour's time. Our places are taken in the train to Folkestone. You can't do it! You can't make me the laughing stock of Europe! You may be cruel but you can't be brutal enough for that! Besides, think of yourself — of your own position. Will you have it said that you left me to go to her to-day? It's too hateful to think of! Stay where you are. I will be sensible, only wait. I must think of something."

She stood with her hand to her forehead. He looked at her steadfastly.

"What is it, then, that you propose?" he asked. "There is nothing in this world will keep me from going straight to Sybil when I leave this hotel. Every moment I hold over my confession is a moment longer of shame."

"Very well," she said, "I do not keep you. Go to her. Tell her the truth — the whole truth, if you will. Don't spare me. But, Jermyn, you have at least the instincts — forgive the bathos of the word but I cannot think of another — of a gentleman. You won't leave me to be made fun of in every drawing-

room of the world! I will change my clothes and drive to Victoria. I will explain that you are to meet me there. You *must* meet me there, you *must* travel to Folkestone with me. On the way we can talk. If I cannot convince you, if you still remain as you are now, then let us separate somehow quietly. But I won't be left like this!"

He glanced at his watch.

"It is now," he declared, "a quarter to four. If I am able to find Sybil, I will be at Victoria in time to catch the train. My luggage shall be there. I will try to save you from what you seem to fear so greatly. If, on the other hand, I cannot find Sybil, I will come to the station but I shall most certainly return, for nothing in this world would induce me to leave London until I have seen her."

Lucille half closed her eyes for a moment. Once more she tried, sadly, almost hopelessly, to win a kinder look from him. She raised his fingers to her lips and kissed them.

"I can't say any more, Jermyn," she murmured. "I feel rather crushed. It must be as you decide. Will you go and tell Florence that I am ready for her? Get rid of Holland, if you can, or take him with you. I couldn't bear any one with us."

Jermyn did as he was bidden. Then he hurried downstairs to where his car was waiting. His servant, who was standing in the hall, looked at him in some surprise.

"You won't change your things, sir?" he asked. "Everything is put out here."

"Not just yet," Jermyn replied. "I shall have to travel as I am. There is something I must see to

first. You can pack up my dressing-case and send it on with the other luggage."

He stepped into the car and lifted the tube to his mouth.

"Burley Court," he told the man.

They moved off. Jermyn drew out the white flower which Lucille had pinned in his buttonhole, and sat crushing it fiercely in his hand.

CHAPTER XXXII

Sybil's maid, who opened the door to him, gazed at this unexpected visitor in blank amazement.

"I must see your mistress at once," he announced. "I hope she is in?"

"Yes, she is in, Sir Jermyn," the maid replied, doubtfully. "She has a headache and was lying down. I don't know — I suppose she will see you, sir."

Jermyn stepped into the hall and flung the silk hat which he was carrying, on to the little hat-stand.

"Beg her to come to me as soon as possible," he said. "Tell her that it is most important."

He made his way into the sitting-room. It was neat and orderly as usual and filled with pretty, inexpensive yellow flowers. The windows were open and a small fire was burning on the grate. There were one or two letters, unopened, on the table by the side of the chair in which she generally sat. He walked restlessly up and down the little apartment. His brain was in a complete turmoil, there were so many things which still were puzzling him. If Sybil were not guilty, and had known all the time that she was not guilty, how was he to account for her attitude, the terror in her face and eyes, the instinctive manner with which she had accepted the story of his sacrifice? He held his forehead. He seemed to be looking out upon a blank wall. If only she would come! He kept on look-

ing impatiently toward the door. It seemed to him that he was waiting there for an eternity. It was, in reality, less than five minutes. Then for a moment he forgot everything else in a great wave of shuddering pity. She had been crying, crying all night. Her eyes were red and swollen, there were black lines under them which he had never seen before. She seemed to have become paler and more fragile. He took a step towards her and held out his arms.

"Before I speak, Sybil," he almost sobbed, "for God's sake, kiss me!"

She gave a little wondering cry. He kissed her eyes and he kissed her lips tenderly.

"Little woman," he whispered, "you have been suffering."

"But I don't understand," she gasped. "What are you doing here? The wedding?"

He led her to the easy-chair and knelt by her side.

"Listen, Sybil," he began; "answer me one question or I shall go mad. Who did you suppose had killed Aynesworth Lakenham?"

There were no more emotions which her face could show. She answered him quite simply.

"Why, you!"

"My God!" he murmured. "Could we have been such children!"

"Didn't you?" she suddenly called out, sitting up in her chair. "Tell me, Jermyn, didn't you kill him?"

"No," he answered, "I didn't."

"Then why," she demanded breathlessly, "did you tell me that you were marrying Lucille de Sayers because she knew?"

He drew a little breath and held both her hands.

"Because, while the police were in the avenue, when there were only a few moments to spare, she told me secretly that she knew that you had done it — you, Sybil — that she had seen you! I believed her! When I told you that I was marrying her because she knew the truth, I meant that I was marrying her not to save myself but to seal her lips about you."

Sybil's hands were pressed to her temples.

"I can't — no, I can't realize it all yet," she said. "It will have to come slowly. But tell me now — is there anything fresh, then? Who did kill him?"

"The American — Norden Smith! He came to Annerley to kill him; he came to Europe for no other purpose. He has killed another man to-day — Aaron Chalmers. They were lovers of his wife."

"Norden Smith!" she whispered hoarsely. "Why, he didn't come till afterwards."

"He entered the billiard-room by the windows from the garden," Jermyn explained quickly. "Then he stole out again and rang the front door bell. It was absolutely simple."

"And I thought it was you!" she gasped. "I saw some one coming outside while he was holding me. I thought that it was you! I ran away directly he let me go. I thought that it was you who came in through the window! Why, I went to his room that night — it was horrible! — went and knocked at his door to beg him to keep silence. I shall never forget that awful night! They wouldn't let me in."

"And I thought you went for yourself!" he murmured.

She laughed a little unsteadily.

"I'd never have pleaded for my own life from him!"

"I am trying to think all the time why I believed Lucille," Jermyn went on. "She gave me the pistol which she said she had seen in your hand. Norden Smith showed me little fragments of your white satin dress, which were scattered upon the floor; showed them to me secretly because he said they might be used as evidence against you. He was honest enough there, but, of course, it all seemed to point to the same thing. This will come clearer to us presently, when we think over our conversations. Just now I can't realize it all. I can't realize how miserably we have been at cross-purposes."

She suddenly sat up in her chair. Her face grew lighter. A splendid gleam of joy lit up her eyes.

"Jermyn," she cried rapturously, "you didn't kill him, I didn't kill him! We have each suffered for the other, suffered in vain. We have lived through all this agony for nothing."

"And we have lived through it," he added, "twenty-four hours too long!"

She looked at him without comprehension for a moment. Then she glanced at his clothes and drew away. He had been holding her in his arms.

"It was afterwards?"

"It was at the reception," he told her. "All London will be ringing with it to-morrow. The daily press hasn't been provided with such a sensation for many a year. Norden Smith was at the reception, lying in wait for Chalmers. There was a man named Grayson, the private detective whom Gerald Lakenham had employed, who was on his track; the man who pretended he was watching you and me. He was on to Norden Smith from the first. He had finished his investiga-

tions and gone to Scotland Yard. They were waiting to arrest him outside. Except for an accident he would have been arrested in the entrance hall of the hotel. He happened to slip by them so they had to follow him into the reception room. He shot Aaron Chalmers through the heart, dead, and then he told us all the truth."

"I can't realize it," she murmured. "It seems too wonderful. This happened this afternoon at your reception? You saw it done? You saw this man Chalmers murdered?"

"I and fifty others," Jermyn replied. "And after it was over, Norden Smith confessed. He came to Annerley for no other purpose but to kill Aynesworth. He passed along the terrace, saw the billiard-room windows open, saw you and Aynesworth struggling. Aynesworth heard him coming and let you go. You turned and fled, thinking it was I. Then he shot Aynesworth, went calmly out of the window again, rang the bell at the front door, and in less than a minute was shown into the bridge-room."

Her hand was still clasping her head.

"I am getting hold of it by degrees," she said. "To think that I have had this weight on my conscience all the time! I thought that you had seen him behaving like a brute and that you had shot him, and that the quarrel was all my fault because I had not told you everything at once."

"And I," he echoed, "dared to think that you had shot him sooner than have him tell me that miserable story! Give me your hands, dear. Let us sit quite quietly for a few minutes. I want to realize things."

Her head dropped upon his shoulder. He held both

her hands tightly. She breathed a deep sigh of content. Then, after a time, she drew a little away.

"The Duchess!" she faltered. "What has she to say?"

Jermyn's face hardened.

"I have spoken with her alone," he said. "She was forced to admit the truth. She had only one idea — she wanted to come between us. It was just a chance and she took it."

"She cares for you," Sybil declared. "I knew it always. Tell me what happened after the tragedy?"

"The people all went away. I took Lucille into an anteroom. I forced the truth from her. Then I came here."

"It was like you to come at once," Sybil murmured. "Bless you for it! But you mustn't stay, must you?"

She glanced at the clock. Jermyn remained silent. His arms tightened a little upon hers.

"Sybil," he said, "you know the truth. Do you want me to go? Do you think it is right that I should leave you?"

Sybil shook her head.

"I can't think about it at all, dear. It is all too complicated and extraordinary. Only you must not leave her alone now."

"Very soon," he continued, "she will be waiting for me at Victoria Station. Whether I go with her or not rests with you. Sybil,—"

Her hand was suddenly pressed upon his mouth. She looked at him and smiled. She seemed, indeed, to have grown younger and more childlike.

"Dear Jermyn," she said, "an hour ago I never dreamed that any gleam of happiness could come to

me to-day. This is all wonderful. Exactly how life will shape itself for either of us in the future, I do not know — do you? But there isn't any doubt about one thing; you must go away now, you must go to her —"

"The ceremony was a trick!" he interrupted.

"Never mind," she answered. "She could only have done it for one thing, you know — because she cared. Besides, she bears your name now. Whatever you may decide that you do not owe her, you do at least owe her the protection of your presence and name. You cannot leave her there. You must go away with her just as you had arranged. For the rest, just yet, I cannot think — I cannot think."

"If I go," he cried harshly, "you can't believe that I go save in one way only?"

She closed her eyes.

"I can't think it all out, Jermyn dear," she went on. "Just at first I know that you will feel like that. I am so thankful, so very thankful that you and I are a little different from other people. We have fought our fight, haven't we, and come to our own. Whatever happens, I shall never be altogether deprived of your companionship. I know that. You will have your work. You and I will often see it grow together. I shall always hope that I may help. But my place, Jermyn, is very clearly defined, isn't it? There isn't anything in this world now can alter that."

He rose slowly to his feet.

"Ah, no," she begged, stretching out her hands to him, "don't look like that! It is only a little part of you that feels bitter and reproachful. You know yourself that when we are happiest, you and I, we are walk-

ing hand in hand in the fairy places, and we can't take the things there that don't belong. You know it so well, dear. The other things — oh, they are very sweet and very overmastering, and they tempt — yes, they tempt all the time, but you and I are brave. You will help me and I shall help you. Kiss me, Jermyn."

She gave him her lips. He kissed her tenderly, kissed her eyes, kissed her hands. Still he remained silent. She passed her arm through his and led him to the door.

"Dear," she whispered, "there are many sorts of happiness in the world. For the last few hours, I will admit that I have been suffering all the miseries of a jealous, tortured woman. Now you are going away, and you are going away with your wife, and I am feeling happier and lighter-hearted than I have felt for weeks and weeks. There's lots in life yet. You'll write me, won't you? And you won't forget Mary? The best of voyages to you, Jermyn; and, dear, good-by! God bless you!"

She closed the door just a little abruptly. Jermyn made his way down to his car and drove to Victoria. In front of the book-stall Lucille was standing, with her maid and Lady Florence by her side. Holland came bustling up with the tickets.

"Everything's all right," he declared. "Luggage all in, reserved carriage, and servants close to. Come along."

Lucille passed a handful of magazines to Jermyn.

"Please pay for these," she said.

Her tone was quite matter-of-fact, but her hand was shaking violently. She raised her veil for a moment as they walked out on to the platform. Lady Flor-

ence was anxious and whispered in her ear, but she only shook her head.

"I felt just a little faint," she admitted. "Jermyn came round the corner rather suddenly. It has been such an extraordinary afternoon, hasn't it? Is this our carriage?"

Jermyn handed her in. The guard himself was standing at the door; a reporter was making notes at a little distance; a photographer took a snapshot of them. Jermyn looked out at it all, unmoved. He had shaken hands with Lady Florence and Holland and was standing now behind Lucille, who held both her hands out of the window.

"You'll write to us, dear?"

"The best of luck, old chap!"

Lucille threw kisses and waved her handkerchief as the train glided away. Then she sat back in her place. Jermyn had already taken the opposite seat. Her eyes glowed at him; her lips quivered with eagerness.

"You are coming!"

He looked at her without the slightest change of expression. The fierce inquiry of her eyes remained unanswered.

"I am coming," he replied, taking up one of the magazines, "to give you the protection of my name."

CHAPTER XXXIII

"'Love is the one force in the world which remains eternal without any sustenance save hope, which lives and grows and flourishes without culture or care. It is the rarest flower in life, and when you have found it you have solved all the mysteries.'"

It was almost her last speech. As she came to the front of the stage, carried away though she was by her part, she was yet acutely conscious of that little note from him which reposed in the bosom of her gown. A few moments later the curtain fell, fell as it had done every night for the last two months, to the accompaniment of loud applause. In the shadows of his box Jermyn stood quite motionless. Lucille was arranging her scarf before the mirror. She was purposely looking away.

"You wouldn't care to come to the *Carlton*, I suppose?" she inquired, as they stood waiting for their car. "Florence is going to be there, and the Lindsays. I said that we might turn up if you had no engagements."

"I am sorry," he replied. "I cannot come tonight."

She made no remark. Only when he had handed her into the car she looked at him for a moment out of her great eyes, hollower now than a few months ago.

"You are not coming home?"

"Not at present," he answered, raising his hat.

He walked round to the stage door, once a familiar enough path. The doorkeeper welcomed him cordially. He passed on the familiar way behind and knocked at the door of the manager's room. Mr. Levenden was overjoyed to see him.

"My dear Sir Jermyn," he exclaimed, "this is a pleasure! At last you have seen your own play, then!"

"To-night for the first time," Jermyn replied. "I only returned this afternoon."

"You know that it's the success of the season, of course?" the manager continued. "You've read all about that and you've had our letters. Miss Cluley has surpassed herself. She is simply wonderful. To judge from the bookings, I should say that we were good for another year."

"I am hoping to see Miss Cluley," Jermyn remarked.

The manager nodded.

"You know her room," he said. "Perhaps I had better just let her know that you are here."

She came to them a few minutes later. She had really grown a little paler and a little thinner during these last months, but Jermyn saw no change. Their words of greeting were simple enough. Even the manager, who was watching, saw nothing unusual in them.

"More wonderful, even, than I had dared to hope!" Jermyn declared, as he bent over her hands. "You have given my 'Nora' life. When she spoke to me to-night across the footlights, I seemed to be back once more in my study, my pen in my hand, wondering whether I could ever collect into a harmonious whole those fugitive thoughts. To-night I am very humble.

I am driven to the conclusion that the interpreter's art must come first."

"You have not traveled abroad for nothing, Sir Jermyn," she laughed. "You have learned the art of making honeyed speeches."

They wished Mr. Levenden good-night and turned as though by mutual consent towards the door.

"You have a car?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Economical as ever," she confessed. "Taxies are so cheap and so easy to get. The same one comes for me every night. You see, he is waiting there now. Take me out to supper, won't you, to some place that's quiet where we can sit and talk? I don't feel inclined to go home just yet."

He gave the chauffeur a direction and stepped in by her side.

"It was nice of you to let me know that you were coming," she said. "I was really glad."

"You like your part? You still find pleasure in it?"

"I find the greatest pleasure of my life in it," she replied swiftly. "Sometimes in the daytime, when I haven't heard from Mary, the hours seem so long and I sit and think and shiver. And then the evening comes and I forget that I am myself at all. I become Nora, and when I am Nora I am glad, because you made her and because she is wonderful."

"And how do you suppose," he asked, a little bitterly, "things have gone with a poor ordinary person who has no other self into which he can escape?"

She smiled at him delightfully; she let her hand fall on his.

"Ah!" she murmured, "that is not true. You have the whole world of your thoughts, a whole garden of beautiful fancies into which you can pass whenever you will."

"The garden is haunted," he answered, a little hoarsely. "Always I seem to look for a little seat among the roses, and the seat is always empty."

"Foolish!" she whispered.

The cab drew up with a little jerk. He handed her out. They passed into the grill-room of a fashionable restaurant, as yet only half full. There was no music and the lights were not brilliant. They chose a table near the wall and Jermyn gave an order to the *maître d'hôtel*, who recognized him with pleasure.

"Tell me about yourself?" she begged simply.

"I have had a hard time," he replied. "There is little more than that, that I can tell you. I have visited many beautiful places, some which were new to me and others which I have been longing to revisit. I have tried to school myself into an appreciative frame of mind. I have found it hard. Every day I have thought 'To-morrow will be easier,' and when to-morrow came I was always disappointed. Sybil, it is difficult indeed to live when the whole flavor of life has gone from the cup."

She closed her eyes for a moment.

"But you are back again," she said softly. "I think that your going away for so long was a mistake. In my heart I feel that it was a mistake. So little makes such a difference. Just to have you sit here with me and talk is such a joy. Are you staying in London, Jermyn?"

"For some months, at any rate."

"I don't think that you must go so far away again," she went on. "I can give up much but I need just a little. I need your friendship, Jermyn. I am so lonely all my days."

"You have no new friends, then?"

"None," she answered, shaking her head a little sorrowfully. "I do not think that any other person in the world can be so utterly alone as I am. It is my own fault, I suppose,— a kink in my tastes. When I am off the stage, I am in the wrong place. I do not care for supper-parties and motor-car rides and river picnics, with just the usual crowd of theatrical friends and their friends and their friends' friends. They all seem to expect just the same things out of life, to enjoy themselves in the same manner. I hate it all, Jermyn. Sometimes I think that I should like to have a few dull, stupid, middle-class friends, who would ask me now and then to go and see them and talk silly commonplaces about the stage. I should like anything rather than — Oh, I am silly to talk like this!" she broke off.

"You are not silly at all," he assured her. "Don't you think that I can appreciate what you mean?"

"People mean to be kind, I suppose," she continued, "and I suppose it's our own fault but there does seem to be something about our profession which doesn't inspire respect. The men all talk to us in the same way and I don't like it. The worst sort of them jostle up against one another in their eagerness to get to know us, and the best never come near, or if they do, they just pass on."

"We must try and alter that," Jermyn declared.

She shook her head.

"My dear," she said, "I am going to have you and I don't want any one else. You must tell me now about — your wife."

"There is so little to tell," he answered. "I have shown her all the consideration I have found it possible to show her and remain honest. She gives way at times to violent fits of temper, she broods a great deal, she reads and thinks too much, smokes too much, sits up too late. Her whole manner of life is scarcely a healthy one."

Sybil raised her veil. Her large, soft eyes were fixed upon his. Her cheeks were more than usually colorless, almost transparent, but her delicacy seemed, if possible, only to increase the beauty of her features.

"Have you had any further explanation?" she asked.

"We have had several — shall I call them crises?" he replied. "So far as I am concerned, there is nothing more to explain. I have never changed, I never shall change. She is beginning to know it."

"She looks thinner," Sybil remarked.

"She is a very passionate woman and she does herself harm by giving way," Jermyn said quietly. "I think myself that under present conditions we should be much better apart. I proposed it to her, but just at present she is unwilling."

Sybil sighed.

"It is so difficult," she murmured. "I suppose if I were really a nice person, and my disposition were altogether good, I should try and make you believe that there was no changing the order of things; that she was your wife, and that, however she became your wife,

her claim was the same. What should you say to me then, Jermyn?"

"I should promptly argue with you," he answered, "and I hate arguments."

"It would all be so simple, in a way," Sybil went on, "if only she did not care. She does care for you, Jermyn."

"I am hoping," he replied, "that it will pass."

"Women are less liable to that sort of thing than men," she told him. "The woman who really cares so seldom changes."

With a little gesture he dismissed the subject.

"For my part," he declared, "I want to drop the burden of these last few weary months. I am going to remember only that we are together again."

"If you only knew what it meant to me!" she said. "Since you left England I have not once been out to supper after the theatre, I have neither lunched nor dined out with any man. I am not sure now that it was not a mistake. People will say all sorts of things."

"What does it matter? We are sure of ourselves. That is enough."

"It isn't for myself," she sighed, "that I care one little bit. You know that. However, we are coming much too near the earth again when we talk about these silly problems. Am I really going to drink champagne? I have forgotten what it tastes like. I am going to wish you all sorts of things."

Gerald Lakenham strolled by, a few minutes later, with several other immaculately dressed young men. He stopped short when he saw Jermyn.

"Back again, sir?" he remarked, holding out his hand.

Jermyn nodded. He was glancing at the little company of musical comedy young ladies to whom Lakenham's companions were making their way.

"I got back this afternoon."

"Had a good time?"

"Very, thank you."

"My man Grayson wasn't such a fool, after all, was he?" Gerald continued.

"He was unnecessarily secretive," Jermyn answered dryly. "If he had treated us with a little more confidence, one could have appreciated his efforts more."

Gerald hesitated for a moment.

"If it isn't taking a liberty," he ventured, "I have known Miss Cluley so long by sight — it would be such an honor if I might be presented."

Jermyn introduced him. The boy bent over Sybil with admiration written in his face.

"Always hoped to have this pleasure, Miss Cluley," he declared, "but, you know, you're the sort of mysterious lady of the stage. One never sees you anywhere, or hears of you, and lately you seem to manage, somehow, even to keep your photographs out of the paper."

"You know," she laughed, "there is no such effectual advertisement as self-effacement."

"But you," he replied, "are the one person in the world who needs no advertisement of any sort. I am simply delighted to be able to say that I have met you at last, Miss Cluley," he added. "I am going to tell the other fellows and you'll see how jealous they'll be!"

She looked across the room and up at him with twinkling eyes.

"I think that your friends are amusing themselves far too well for any sensations of that sort," she assured him.

He laughed a little self-consciously.

"They are only boys, after all," he said, fingering his tie. "Good night, Jermyn! Good night, Miss Cluley!"

He passed on. Jermyn watched him with a slight frown.

"I am convinced that it is the beginning," Sybil remarked, "of my downward course. I feel that I have been introduced to a really dangerous man-about-town. What a pity that these nice boys do such silly things!"

Jermyn was thoughtful for a time. He glanced around the place and the atmosphere of it seemed somehow to depress him.

"Sybil," he went on suddenly, "tell me, is there any real change, is there anything really and entirely different between us, because — because I am married?"

"Why should there be?" she asked, wonderingly.

"I don't know," he replied. "I don't even know whether I ought to ask you to have supper with me here alone. Look at all these people. They all have their little arrangements. One knows of them. In your profession it has become the custom to recognize them, to regard them as inevitable. Will they dare to look at you and remark that you are having supper with a married man, I wonder?"

"You silly person, of course they will!" she laughed. "They have been waiting too long to have something to say about me, to miss this. And what does it matter? Are you a shade the better or the worse for what people say about you?"

"Somehow or other," he confessed, "I always have the feeling that one is."

"It's quite a new theory," she sighed. "What do you propose doing about it? Neglecting me?"

"Never!"

"Then don't be foolish," she begged. "Be thankful that I am a sensible person and that our friendship is a sensible and reasonable thing. If other people misunderstand it, why should I care? It is a small price which we must pay for a great joy. If it were not for Mary's sake, it would even amuse me."

Mr. Levenden passed them with a knowing smile and bow. Some other of Jermyn's acquaintances would have gone by without recognition, if Jermyn had not forced it. He rose to his feet when the time came to go, a little impatiently, yet a glance from her, as he arranged her coat, soothed him again.

"To see you and be with you again, Sybil," he whispered, as they went out, "is more wonderful, even, than I had hoped. I feel so much younger, life seems to have become more elastic, more possible. If only we could escape from this!"

He waved his hand back at the small tables with the rose-shaded lights, the murmur of soft laughter, the generally voluptuous air. Their little environment, pleasant enough in its way, grated upon him for her sake. She laughed at him bravely.

"Jermyn," she murmured, "so long as you are with me, so long as I can feel for an hour or so most days that we can sit and talk together, and that I can come to you and tell you my thoughts and beg for your help when I am low-spirited and miserable, then I simply don't care about anything else in the world. You must

try and feel like that, dear, too. It is the only way. Try and remember always just what I have told you, how much it means to me, how little I care about the other things."

He passed her arm through his and they crossed the pavement to the taxicab.

CHAPTER XXXIV

The splendor of an early spring had added sunshine to the other glories of a prolonged London season. While the east end was feverishly excited over the financial inaptitudes of a radical government, the west blossomed out in a glory of crocuses and hyacinths, whose faint, promising odor seemed to hold all Mayfair under its spell.

Lady Annerley, as she chose now to be called, received her friends in a house in Berkeley Square which had been rented for twelve months. She gave two dinner-parties and a dance, at all of which functions Jermyn played the part of host perfectly and lifelessly. It was when the cards were being sent out to her last entertainment, a reception which included her more Bohemian friends, that Lucille at last approached the subject which had never yet been discussed between them.

"I have looked through your list, Jermyn," she remarked. "I will send cards to every one, of course. But what about Miss Sybil Cluley?"

Jermyn looked across the table at his wife.

"Miss Cluley's name was not upon my list," he replied.

"So I noticed," Lucille said. "Why not? She is asked, I presume, to a good many such gatherings, and your professional connection with her would seem to entitle her to a card from me."

"There is no question," Jermyn asserted coldly, "of her being entitled to an invitation. I do not, however, choose to ask you to receive Miss Cluley here as a guest."

Lucille laid down her pen and turned slowly round. Jermyn, except for his hat, was dressed for the street. He had been, in fact, on his way to the door when he had paused to answer his wife's last question.

"What does that mean exactly, Jermyn?" she asked.

"It means," he answered calmly, "that I do not desire to bring the woman, the only woman whom I have ever cared to think of as my wife, into my house on the invitation of one who has usurped her position by a trick."

Lucille sat quite still for a minute.

"You are very explicit," she murmured.

"I am anxious that there should be no misunderstanding."

"By a trick," she repeated softly to herself. "Yes, I suppose that is what it was. Do you think I have gained much by it, Jermyn?"

"You have gained all that you had a right to expect," he declared.

"All that I had a right to expect! I wonder! You give me, then, Jermyn, do you, all that a woman has a right to expect from her husband?"

"Most assuredly I do not," he admitted. "On the other hand, most marriages are arranged differently. In most marriages the man has something to say."

She looked at him across the room, silently, almost hopelessly. She had tried everything, all the arts her woman's wit could devise, and she was a woman who

knew all those arts and was well-practiced in them. And there was nothing else, nothing further she could do. She sat there, very slim and elegant, beautiful in her plain, tightly fitting gown, beautiful in a manner entirely of her own; beautiful though her cheeks were thinner and her eyes a little sunken.

"You are hard, Jermyn," she said.

"I am what circumstances have made me," he replied. "I lived for a good many years without thought of marriage, without care for your sex. Then there came a time when, as I suppose you would put it, I fell in love. No doubt I had it all the worse because it wasn't an every-day occurrence with me. What I felt for Sybil Cluley in those days, I feel now and shall feel forever. Is not this sufficient answer when you speak of my attitude towards you?"

She shivered a little and turned back to her writing.

"It is a sufficient answer," she assented. . . .

That night there were many people who made remarks about Lucille. She and Jermyn were present at a dinner-party given by the Duchess of Rochester, who was a very great person indeed. Lucille wore black, a wonderful and rather daring dress, against which the pallor of her cheeks and the scarlet of her lips seemed curiously emphasized. Lady Florence could not make up her mind about her friend.

"I cannot feel altogether satisfied," she told her neighbor at dinner, "about Lucille. Is she improved by her marriage or isn't she? Is she marvelously happy or desperately miserable? Look at her. To me she seems more beautiful than ever before in her life, and yet there is something I don't like."

Her neighbor happened to be Sir James Bondman,

Lucille's own physician. He glanced across at her critically.

"To me," he remarked, "she looks as though she had had some sort of a shock. Wasn't there a terrible tragedy at her wedding reception? Of course there was. I so seldom read the papers or I should not have had to ask the question," he continued, apologetically. "There was an American, wasn't there, who shot poor Chalmers right before her face and then confessed to that queer murder of Lakenham. Found dead in his cell the very morning he was to be brought up for trial?"

"Yes," Lady Florence agreed. "I suppose that was enough to shatter any one's nerves. It was a terrible start for their wedding journey. Yet, somehow or other, Lucille is just the one woman who I should have thought would have been able to stand it. She always seemed to me as though she had nerves of steel. She can look on at suffering, horrible suffering, too, without flinching, and she bears pain, when it is inevitable, with utter indifference. Something has happened more than that, I think."

"So far as her appearance goes, I can only make one remark," the physician declared. "I have known her intimately all her life. I have always considered her attractive, but I must confess that she has never made the impression upon me that she makes at this moment. This evening I consider her the most individual and the most strikingly beautiful woman in the room — with the one nameless and inevitable exception," he added, with a little bow.

Lady Florence nodded.

"I see what you mean," she admitted. "But tell

me, from what does this new attractiveness come? Something, I believe, has happened upon which Lucille hadn't counted. Her mouth and eyes have altered. I don't believe she could stroll through the accident ward of a hospital now as I have seen her do a year or two ago."

Sir James sighed.

"If I have an opportunity," he said, "I shall talk to her this evening, after dinner."

Jermyn escorted his wife home that night after the dinner-party. Contrary to his custom, he entered the house with her, although he turned at once towards his study.

"You are not going to the club, then?" she inquired.

"Not to-night," he replied. "I have a little work to do here."

She followed him, after a moment's hesitation, into his study. He went over to his desk. Then, glancing around, he saw her in the room. His eyebrows were slightly lifted.

"You will excuse me," he remarked, drawing some proof sheets towards him.

"Jermyn!"

He turned round once more, this time a little startled. Her cry had rung out, shrill and vibrant — the cry of a woman in torture. She stood looking at him from back among the shadows of the room, which was lit only by the green-shaded lamp upon his desk. There was something spectral about her appearance.

"Well?"

His monosyllable seemed only to lash the passion which she barely kept in check.

"Jermyn," she cried, "you are treating me hate-

fully, hideously! You are torturing me! My God, haven't you any heart at all? Are you going to keep me suffering like this until the end?"

"Why should you suffer?" he asked calmly.

"Why should I suffer!" she repeated. "Don't turn away. Sit as you're sitting now. Look at me. We've known one another for a good many years. Do you think that it was for nothing I lied? Do you think that it was for nothing that I told you that hateful story? Do you suppose I didn't go through Hell before I made up my mind that it was the only way?"

"I am not able," Jermyn said, "to follow the intricacies of your reasoning. I cannot conceive of any woman fashioning so devilish a scheme."

She came just a little nearer to him. It was as though he was a magnet which drew her. She seemed to be keeping away with difficulty.

"Jermyn," she exclaimed, "sometimes I think that you must be a creature from some impossible world! You don't understand — you — a writer! You've written of things, you've felt things. What did I do it for? What did I run that risk for? Not for your name — my own is better. Not for your money — I have more than you. Not for your title — I could use a greater than yours, if I chose. Jermyn, you know that I love you — you know that I have loved you always!"

"I do not know that," he declared. "I have never known it."

"You were a fool!" she cried. "You were a fool not to see and know! It is because you keep your head in the clouds, it is because you are always thinking and preaching that men and women are strong enough and

fine enough to live among the mountains and never come down to earth. We aren't; we weren't made like it. I love you as a real, human woman loves and worships the only man on earth for her. Nothing changes me. I suffered agonies at Annerley, but those agonies were nothing to what I have suffered since you and I left England together, six months ago."

"Are you reproaching me with anything?" he asked, coldly.

"My God, yes!" she shrieked. "I am reproaching you! You are treating me brutally just to gratify your own lust for revenge. I am your wife, Jermyn. You can't escape from it. You are married to me. Read the service. You heard it, every word. Think what our life has been! You have kept me away with both arms, me, who have been thirsting for a single word of kindness from your lips, a single kiss, a fugitive caress, even the touch of your arms. You could feed me on trifles, Jermyn. I'd pick up the merest scraps of affection and grovel for more. But you — I can't bear it any longer! Oh, I can't bear it!"

She suddenly collapsed. She lay face downwards on the sofa near where she had been standing. Her long, slim body was convulsed with sobs. She shook from head to foot, her hands beat the cushions. Jermyn sat and looked at her. His expression was simply faintly softened by a pity entirely impersonal. Nevertheless, he rose to his feet and came and stood over her.

"Lucille," he said, "I am sorry. I had hoped that you would recognize the situation. It is not my fault that I married you — you know that. Therefore, what do I owe you? You keep me here by your side but you can't expect to buy those things from me which

a man can honorably give only when he loves. I have nothing of that sort to give you, Lucille."

She grew gradually calmer. When she got up, he was for a moment startled by her appearance. He would, indeed, have led her to the door but she ran away from him like some frightened animal.

"Don't! Don't touch me," she moaned, "not just now! I can't bear it! I suppose I am hysterical tonight. Don't come near me, Jermyn. Go back to your place. Don't! Don't! Don't!"

She half ran out of the room, her shoulders bent, a strange limpness about her. She seemed suddenly to have lost carriage, grace and life itself. The door closed. Jermyn went slowly back to his seat. He turned the lamp a little higher. He looked down at the proof sheets before him — he saw nothing. It seemed to him that the room was full of voices — ghostly, plaintive voices. He heard them on every side, curiously thrilling in their unearthly note of despair:

"Don't! Don't! Don't!"

CHAPTER XXXV

Sybil remained an enigma to the gossips of stage-land. She was gentle and courteous to her old friends, but her avoidance of new acquaintances was marked and definite. Jermyn was the only man with whom she was ever seen, and Jermyn was scarcely the sort of person to be lightly accused of a liaison. Mr. Levenden took a fatherly interest in her and his wife did all she could to bring Sybil more into their little world.

"What you want, my dear," she decided one day, "is a chaperon. Every young girl of your position and appearance, living alone, should certainly have a chaperon."

"Should they?" Sybil answered quietly. "Well, I never feel that I need one. I don't see what I owe to public opinion that I should bore myself with an old lady and pay her for boring me."

"But, my dear, it's so very unconventional," the manager's wife persisted. "Even Miss Cartnell has one — in fact they all do."

"Perhaps," Sybil remarked, "they need them. If the stories one hears about Miss Cartnell are half of them true, she certainly does. For my part, I go about so little that it would seem absurd for me to saddle myself with such an incubus. One's work doesn't finish in the theatre, you know, Mrs. Levenden," she continued. "I often spend an afternoon thinking over

my part, and I read all the plays which are sent to me. That takes a good deal of time."

Mrs. Levenden shook her head.

"My dear," she said, "it isn't natural at your age. You ought to be going about with other young people, and enjoying yourself. That's the way to keep young. Why, you'll be a little old maid in no time."

"That doesn't terrify me in the least," Sybil assured her, smiling. "I don't at all believe that old maids have such a very bad time — not the sort of old maid I fancy myself as being."

"All the same, it isn't natural," Mrs. Levenden persisted. "Except for — forgive me, dear, for mentioning his name, won't you? — Sir Jermyn Annerley, you are never seen out with any one at all."

"There is no one else," Sybil replied, "whom I care to be seen out with. Sir Jermyn is always interesting. We have our work to talk about, and many other things."

"But bless the girl," Mrs. Levenden exclaimed, "it isn't a good thing to be seen out with no one except one man! There's safety in numbers, you know. Come and spend the week-end with us — this week-end, now. Harry has some young men coming down and we'll stir things up."

Sybil laughed and shook her head.

"I know your parties are delightful," she said, "but they are not for me."

Nevertheless, Sybil thought of her friend's advice that morning when she took her usual walk in the Park. Although she would never have confessed it to Jermyn, in those days she was very conscious of missing the great things of life. The very brilliancy of the season,

the perfume and color of the flowers, the soft blue sky, the sunshine and the mild west wind, all seemed charged to her sometimes with a sort of delicate mockery: a spurious, fantastic invitation towards the delights of a life whose gates were closed to her. She watched the faces of the young girls whom she met, so many of them with young men of their own age. Were these things indeed passing her by? She was exactly in this mood, standing on the edge of the curbstone, preparing to cross the road, when a great motor-car drew up almost beside her, and a young man leaned from his place at the driving wheel towards her, with uplifted hat.

"Good morning, Miss Cluley!"

She recognized him at once, although the very thought of his name gave her a faint shiver. It was Gerald Lakenham. He looked at her a little eagerly.

"I wondered," he said diffidently, "seeing you alone, Miss Cluley, I wondered whether I couldn't tempt you for just a short spin? I've got a new car — a perfect beauty. She goes — well, just get in and let me put her on fourth speed down the Bayswater Road. Do!"

Sybil hesitated only for a moment. Afterwards, it seemed amazing to her that she should have consented.

"I'll come," she decided. "I think I should love it. The car does look a beauty."

The boy's face was flushed with pleasure. He handed her in, and the chauffeur left his side and entered the tonneau.

"You wouldn't rather be behind, would you?" he inquired, a little doubtfully. "I don't think it's half such fun myself. There's a wind shield and you haven't a very large hat, have you?"

"I am sure that I shall like it better here," she declared.

The great car glided off, took its place among the line of other vehicles, and shot out into the Bayswater Road like a live thing. Sybil, after a moment's nervousness, began to feel the exhilaration of it.

"What time have you to be back?" he asked her.

"Any reasonable time," she answered. "It's about eleven now, isn't it? I like to have lunch about one."

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Two hours! Why, we can scour the country. Would you care for another rug?"

"I am perfectly comfortable," she assured him, leaning back, "and perfectly happy."

They passed a little tediously out of the suburbs into the country. Then Gerald turned southwards and they came to a region of curving lanes, lanes whose hedges were wreathed with dog-roses and honeysuckle, lanes which divided meadows in which larks were singing, meadows starred with yellow buttercups. The sky was bluer than ever that morning, the wind softer. Sybil sat most of the time with half-closed eyes.

"Please don't think that you must talk to me," she begged, after he had made several attempts at spasmodic conversation. "I know quite well that one ought not to speak to any one driving a big car. Believe me, I just like to sit back and look out into the country and breathe this air. It's wonderful."

"And doesn't she rip!" Gerald exclaimed, enthusiastically. "Never changed speeds since we turned into the Bayswater Road, and that last hill was a bit of a corker with the pull up for those wagons. Look at her now, just with a touch. It's all on the throttle.

Why, I believe I could get her to sixty-eight miles an hour."

"Don't try, please!" she laughed. "I like this smooth gliding along."

"We are not exactly crawling, you know," he reminded her. "We are doing an easy thirty."

"Then please don't do any more," she begged.

They passed across a great common, where the gorse bushes were breaking into yellow blossom and the young bracken was shooting up, a new and wonderful green. In the distance a lake shone like a mirror; in the background the woods rolled away to the horizon. Sybil's enjoyment was complete. Her companion obeyed her bidding literally. He devoted his whole attention to the car, and the few remarks he made were entirely concerned with their progress. When at last they found themselves once more in the streets of London, Sybil sat up with a little sigh of regret.

"Where shall I put you down?" he asked. "Where do you live? I'll take you all the way — I'd like to."

"Burley Court," she told him. "We are going into London that side, aren't we?"

He assented. He was suddenly a little shy again.

"I wonder," he began, after a few moments' hesitation, "wouldn't you come and have lunch with me somewhere?"

She shook her head.

"Do you know, I hate restaurants," she remarked simply. "I never go out at all. I am afraid you will think I'm a terribly old-fashioned frump, but I love to have just a cutlet and one glass of claret in my sitting-room, with the paper propped up in front of me, and then lie on the couch and smoke a cigarette afterwards."

He was obviously disappointed.

"I know you don't often go anywhere," he said. "I've never seen you in a restaurant in my life except with old Jermyn. I thought this morning, though," he went on, "the air and all that might have given you a little better appetite and you might have felt like a change. You don't think it's cheek, my asking, do you?"

She looked at him for a moment and hesitated. After all, she knew without any conceit that her coming would give him pleasure, and her morning had certainly been delightful.

"Well, I will change my mind just this once, if I may," she declared, smiling. "I will come and lunch with you, if you like, only you must take me home almost directly afterwards. I have a new understudy, and she is coming to talk with me this afternoon."

"Hooray!" Gerald exclaimed. "That's fine! Now I wonder where you'd like to go — whether you'd prefer a grill-room, I mean, or a swagger restaurant."

"Grill-room, by all means," she begged. "I am not in the least prepared for anywhere smart."

"We'll go to the *Carlton* grill-room," he declared. "I can always get a table there and the food's topping."

"The *Carlton* grill-room will do very nicely," she assured him.

The traffic became thicker and there was very little more opportunity for conversation before they descended in Pall Mall. Freed from the responsibility of his car, her companion became pleasantly loquacious. He secured his table from the chief *maître d'hôtel*, and with an air of conscious pride followed Sybil through

the room. During their meal he talked pleasantly of himself and his doings. Sybil was a good listener and she was always amused. After all, he was rather an interesting study — a young man barely twenty-four years old, just come into his title, with enormous wealth and everything in life before him. One could scarcely fail to be interested at the way his ideas shaped themselves, and there was a certain fascination in the perfectly natural manner in which he chattered of his responsibilities, his pleasures and his hopes. When he left her, shortly before three o'clock, at the door of the building in which her flat was situated, Sybil felt really grateful to him. Somehow or other, he seemed to have brought her, for a little time, more in touch with the world in which it seemed her natural heritage to belong, the world which was at once so joyful and almost obtrusively gay, and from which she had sometimes, in her moments of depression, fancied herself banished forever.

"Will you come again one morning?" he begged.

"I'd love to," she answered, honestly.

"Then I shall telephone, or write and ask you," he said. "Don't bother to answer, if you can't come, and don't bother to come if you've anything else you want to do. Just wait until I hit upon the right moment. Or if you ever have a headache and feel like it yourself," he went on eagerly, "just ring me up — I'll send you the number — and I'll be down as soon as the car can bring me, whatever I'm doing."

She laughed as she gave him her hand.

"You are very nice," she declared. "I'll come, with pleasure, and before long, too."

She waved her hand to him as he drove away. Some-

how or other, the lift seemed a little smaller than usual, and a little slower, the air of the place gloomier, her little flat more unoccupied and emptier. She took off her hat and jacket and looked at herself in the glass. Yes, there were wrinkles under her eyes, a blue vein was already beginning to show at her temple. She began to question herself almost passionately. Was she really wise in letting life slip by her, in nursing forever her hopeless love? And then she smiled a little sadly at the sheer inutility of the question. In her heart she knew that as long as she lived there could be no other man in her life save one. . . .

Gerald went joyously round to his club, and almost the first person he saw was Jermyn.

"Hullo, sir!" he exclaimed, cheerfully. "Do you know whom I've taken for a drive in my new car this morning?"

"I am quite sure," Jermyn replied, "that the circle of your acquaintances is far too wide for me to make any reasonable guess. Unless," he added, his tone growing a trifle colder, "you have been round to see Lucille?"

Gerald shook his head.

"I was driving in the Park, trying my new *Daimler*," he explained, "and I saw Miss Cluley standing on the pavement. It was just an impulse but it seemed to me that she looked a little lonely. I stopped and asked her to come for a ride and she said yes at once. We went right down into the country for two hours and I've just given her some lunch at the *Carlton* grill-room."

Jermyn was silent for a moment. Always rather a keen and conscientious analyst of any unusual emotion, he was absolutely unable to account for the curious de-

pression which suddenly crept in upon him. It was a natural incident, absolutely natural. In his heart he knew that he ought to be glad that Sybil had had a pleasant morning, and yet he hated it. The boy was nearly of her own age, a part of the life which she should be leading. He realized, too, the utter absurdity of it, and yet the thought that she had been seen driving with Gerald alone, had lunched with him alone, irritated him unreasonably. He had expected too much of her. Was this the beginning of the end?

"I am sure Miss Cluley appreciated it," he said quietly. "She loves the country."

"Isn't she a ripper!" Gerald exclaimed, enthusiastically. "I never met any one so charming and so easy to talk to. I don't wonder at your liking to write plays for her, sir," he went on. "I only jolly well wish I could. Hullo, Sammy!"

Gerald passed on to join one of his boon companions. Jermyn went out into the streets, very quiet and a little thoughtful. He suddenly felt older, a generation removed. Perhaps, even, the respectful "sir" with which the boy had addressed him — the hallmark of his seniority — irritated. He had left the club, meaning to go around and see Sybil. Even after he had called a taxicab, however, he hesitated. Something told him that it was better for him to keep away.

"Where to, sir?" the man asked.

"Berkeley Square," Jermyn replied.

They started off and turned into St. James's Street. Jermyn put his head out of the window.

"Go to Burley Court," he ordered.

CHAPTER XXXVI

Sybil, standing on the hearthrug of her little sitting-room, was declaiming one or two of the lines in her part concerning which there had been a slight difference of opinion, to the young lady who had recently been promoted to be her understudy. She welcomed Jermyn with her usual smile, but his nerves were already a little on edge and he fancied that there was a certain amount of surprise in her greeting.

"You have arrived just in time," she assured him. "Let me present you to the author, Miss Sinclair — Sir Jermyn Annerley, Miss Sinclair. I am trying to explain some of the passages at the end of the second act to my new understudy. Now you are here, you can sit down in that easy-chair and help us."

"It's a wonderful part," Miss Sinclair declared, "but I hope I never have to play it. Too subtle for me, I am sure. I can't think how you could have thought out such a character as Nora, Sir Jermyn. You must have had a tremendous experience of our sex."

He smiled a little curiously.

"I am not sure," he replied, "that a tremendous experience was necessary. Nora is only an average woman."

"It is the average woman," Miss Sinclair insisted, "who is always incomprehensible. I do flatter myself that I can generally tell what a man is going to do or

say when he's in a certain position. With a woman, even one's dearest friend, one can never be quite sure."

"When you two have quite finished exchanging subtleties —" Sybil put in gently. "Are you ready now? Read those last two speeches again, then, please, Miss Sinclair."

Jermyn leaned back in his chair and listened. Sometimes he listened, sometimes he watched Sybil. She was at all times too entirely natural to be in the least embarrassed by his presence and she devoted herself to her task with a devotion which, considering that it was entirely a labor of love, very much impressed him. Later on, when they were alone, he remarked upon it. She laughed as she sank on to a footstool at his feet.

"Isn't it your play, dear? I should hate to think, if anything happened to me so that I was out of the cast even for a few nights, that the performance would suffer too much."

"You are the play," he declared.

"Rubbish!" she laughed. "You mustn't flatter me. Now tell me why you came this afternoon with a face like a thunder-cloud? It has cleared off a little but something has annoyed you, hasn't it?"

He hesitated. The last few minutes had been full of reflections, inspired by the delicate atmosphere which Sybil seemed always to create around her. The simple flowers and adornments of her room, her unselfish cordiality to the girl who had just left, the frank, sweet pleasure which shone out of her eyes at his coming, all seemed like mute reproofs to his irritable and disturbed state of mind. He hesitated, uncertain how even to hint at his thoughts.

"The thunder-cloud has passed," he said, taking her hand between his. "You have charmed it away."

"Nevertheless?" she persisted.

"I saw young Gerald at the club. He annoyed me."

"But why?" she asked, with lifted eyebrows. "He has been so charming to me this morning. Didn't he tell you?"

"He did," Jermyn admitted grimly. "The young cub was chock-full of conceit. I could have kicked him!"

She looked into his face, for a moment, genuinely puzzled.

"You didn't mind my going?"

"I did," he assured her. "I hated it."

The tiny little lines at the corners of her eyes deepened. She began to laugh, with her eyes at first and then her lips. When she had finished, she sat on the ground at his feet and wiped the tears away.

"I believe you were jealous, Jermyn!" she declared.

The puerility of his emotion confronted him now, unexcused and naked.

"I was jealous in the meanest possible way," he confessed.

"Gerald is playing around town like other boys of his age and temperament, and I hated to have you seen with him."

"But that is so simple, then, dear," she told him softly. "I will not go out with him again, if I can avoid it without hurting his feelings. It was only a moment's indecision — and he was just as kind and delightful as could be. Now I know how you feel, it is different, of course."

Jermyn rose suddenly to his feet. Her answer had completed his humiliation.

"Sybil!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Sybil!"

Looking up into his face, she saw the change. Her knees began to tremble. She rose slowly. Her eyes were still fixed upon his, but she said nothing. He caught her suddenly by the wrists.

"It is intolerable!" he cried. "Intolerable!"

Her eyes alone questioned him.

"I am like a clog upon your life," he continued fiercely. "I receive everything, I give nothing. Don't you know, child, that you are young and life is beautiful? Can't you hear it knocking at the doors of your heart? Didn't you feel it just a little — today?"

"I feel nothing," she answered, looking at him with shining eyes, "except when I am with you. The rest of the days may go as they please. They do not count. They do not belong to my life. The calendar of my days consists only of the days when we are together. You call yourself a clog! You foolish, foolish person! Do I need to tell you that I would sooner have you and not have you; I would sooner be as we are now and remain always just what we are to one another at this moment, than have all the boys in London crazy to marry me?"

He stood and looked at her — realizing. He felt suddenly humbled and yet enriched. It was the world's greatest gift which she was offering to him, the love which comes without bargaining, without the artificial stimulus of passion, the love which only woman can conceive in its highest form. Jermyn felt in those moments a deep humility. The slight conceit engendered

by the æsthetic and purposeful exclusiveness of his life served him no longer any useful purpose. From the lips of this little actress, whose birth was middle-class and whose education had been scanty, who had been adrift upon the world at the age when most girls go to finishing schools, he received the lesson of his life.

"I am not worthy, Sybil dear — no one could be worthy," he murmured.

The conventions which — it must be admitted, chiefly for her sake — Jermyn had hitherto made some effort to observe with regard to his association with Sybil, he from that moment ignored. They had tea together in St. James's Street and strolled afterwards along Bond Street, looking in the shop windows, making even a few purchases. They were laughing together and disputing over the possession of a parcel, when Lucille passed them. She was in her landaulette and they were walking, but she was near enough to see the smile upon Jermyn's lips, to notice a new spring in his bearing, as he walked alertly along. People turned to look at them, too. They were rather a distinguished couple — the prettiest woman on the stage and the most brilliant writer of plays. It was a significant companionship. Lucille was swept slowly by. Her cheeks were almost ashen; her hand had stolen involuntarily to her side. She smiled at some friends who passed by, but there was something ghastly about the parting of her lips. She felt that that little picture in Bond Street on this sunny afternoon was, notwithstanding its torture, indelible. It was before her all the time; it would be before her always.

She pulled the checkstring presently and ordered her chauffeur to drive to Harley Street. Sir James Bond-

man was in the act of stepping into his brougham when he saw her alight. He hastened to greet her upon the pavement.

"You can spare me a few minutes professionally?" she inquired.

"With all the pleasure in the world, my dear lady," he replied, reopening the door through which he had just come. "My work for the day is over. To tell you the truth, a fit of idleness was upon me and I was on my way round to the club to get a rubber of bridge."

He led the way into his sanctum, a comfortable if somewhat gloomy apartment, and wheeled up an easy-chair for his visitor. Then he seated himself before his desk and watched her for a moment through half-closed eyes.

"What can I do for you?" he asked simply.

"Examine me," she answered. "I am ill."

"Won't you tell me your symptoms?" he said, taking up his stethoscope.

"I have no symptoms," she replied, looking at him with burning eyes. "Nevertheless, I am ill."

He examined her thoroughly. She endured everything without either impatience or anxiety. When he had finished, and the maid whom he had summoned to assist her with her toilette had disappeared, she turned towards him feverishly.

"Well?"

"There is nothing whatever the matter with you," he told her.

"You mean that I am sound everywhere?"

"Organically, you are entirely sound. Your nerves are disturbed. I could give you some medicine; I would rather not."

She brooded for a brief space of time.

"I am twenty-eight years old," she remarked. "You mean, then, that I may possibly live for another twenty or thirty years?"

"Not possibly — almost certainly."

She rose to her feet a few moments later.

"Thank you, my friend," she said, a little wearily. "You have told me what I wanted to know."

He led her towards the door. On the way he slipped his arm through hers.

"Lucille," he said, "do you want some real old-fashioned practitioner's advice — perfectly sound, mind, perfectly sound, and in your case absolutely true?"

"Of course I do," she assured him.

"How long have you been married?" he asked.

"Nearly seven months," she replied. "Why?"

He whispered for a moment in her ear. She stopped short. The color burned in her cheeks and then streamed slowly away. She faltered. The physician watched her gravely.

"Ah, you fashionable ladies!" he murmured, as he threw open the door. "You make our profession prosperous by your whims. I think I shall send you a tonic, all the same. You needn't take it unless you like."

"Do!" she begged. "I haven't tasted medicine for years. Good-by, and thanks ever so much."

She smiled at him from the corner of her landaulette, and was whirled away. Sir James, who was a methodical man, returned to his study, took out his tablets, and wrote on the space devoted to the following day:

"To see Jermyn. Ask lunch, if possible."

CHAPTER XXXVII

Three times was Sybil called before the curtain at the end of the second act. The enthusiasm, indeed, instead of waning seemed rather to increase, night by night. Sir James' companion glanced towards him in triumph.

"Well?" he asked.

The physician was quiet but sincere in his reply.

"I am surprised," he confessed. "Miss Cluley is a revelation to me in more ways than one. Let us smoke a cigarette outside."

They passed out with the throng. Sir James excused himself and buttonholed the manager, who was a patient and an old acquaintance.

"Mr. Levenden," he declared, "I am charmed with your play. I find, too, that you are entirely right in what you told me about Miss Cluley. It would give me the greatest pleasure to present to her my congratulations in person. I wonder whether it would be possible for you to obtain an introduction for me?"

Mr. Levenden was somewhat flattered.

"I cannot absolutely promise, Sir James," he answered, "as Miss Cluley makes it a rule never to receive any one in her room. I feel, however, that if ever there was a case in which an exception was possible, it is yours. If you will come round with me now behind, she has a wait of nearly half an hour. I

will send a message into her room. This way, if you don't mind."

A message was sent in to Miss Cluley and in a moment or two the reply came — Miss Cluley would be very glad indeed to receive Sir James Bondman for a few minutes. Mr. Levenden himself accompanied the physician and uttered a word of introduction. Sybil received them pleasantly but with some slight sign of surprise. As soon as the manager had departed, Sir James abandoned his more conventional attitude.

"Miss Cluley," he said, "I have come round to see you, acting entirely upon an impulse for which I hold you, however, responsible. It is your own words, spoken in that wonderful act to which I have just listened, which have inspired me with this — I fear you may call it presumptuous — resolution."

She smiled at him, perplexed but gracious.

"Pray say just whatever you like, Sir James," she invited. "You really needed no introduction to me. I have heard a very dear friend of mine speak of you often."

"It is about that friend and his wife," Sir James continued gravely, "that I should like, if I might, to speak to you."

A slight shadow crossed Sybil's face. She motioned her visitor to a chair and changed her own place.

"I do not quite understand," she said, "but I am willing — I shall be very pleased — to hear anything you think it well to say to me."

"I am going," he warned her, "to be very unconventional. When I came to the theatre this evening, I had no idea that I should find you the sort of young lady to whom I should care to say what I am about to

say. But I flatter myself that I am a judge of character. I believe that I am doing a wise thing in yielding to an impulse and in seeking this interview."

"Of course," Sybil reminded him pleasantly, "I am finding all this very mysterious."

"The mysteries will disappear very soon," Sir James went on; "in fact I am going to speak very plainly indeed. Jermyn Annerley is the son of my oldest friend. I brought him into the world; I have known him all his life. Lucille, his wife, I have known, too, since she was a baby. You can understand, therefore, that I take an interest in them both."

"I can understand that," Sybil admitted. "What I cannot understand —"

"Wait," the physician begged. "Miss Cluley, be patient with me if I am clumsy. I am an old man, and such gifts as I have are not of the tongue, and although in my profession it is supposed to be unfashionable, I have a heart. These young people have been married — what is it — less than a year, at any rate. A few days ago, Lady Annerley came to me as a patient. She came to ask only a few weary questions. I examined her. There was nothing wrong. Yet, Miss Cluley, I am going to place my whole professional position in your hands when I tell you the truth — the truth which I did not tell her. Although my actual words were true ones when I told her that there was nothing the matter, it is, nevertheless, also true that unless some change takes place in the manner of her life, Lucille will not live."

Sybil looked across the room at him steadily. For several moments she said nothing. In the distance they could hear the orchestra tuning up; outside, the rum-

bling of feet in the corridor, fragments of conversation, the creaking of ropes as the scene shifters attended to their duties. But in the room there was silence. Sybil was looking intently into the stern, calm face of the man who had seated himself on the edge of an easy-chair, a few feet away.

"You must please go on now," she said at last. "You have told me so much — more, I should think, than you have any right to tell me. You must tell me why you are here?"

"I have come to you, Miss Cluley," Sir James continued, "because when I sat in the stalls just now and watched you, I said to myself — 'I know little of the stage, I know nothing of the art of acting, but I believe that this woman is a real woman and has a woman's heart, or the words which she spoke — beautiful words they are, too — would never come so naturally to her lips.' And then the impulse came to me to tell her that a woman whom she knows must die of that most impossible, most incurable thing, a broken heart, because — because —"

"I am afraid that you must finish, Sir James," Sybil insisted.

"Because her husband is either faithless to her," the physician said firmly, "either faithless or, for some mysterious reason, notwithstanding their recent marriage, remains her husband in name only."

"Why not go to him?"

"It is a reasonable question. I have already made several efforts to see Jermyn. I think that he has been out of town. I shall see him, and very soon. I am only waiting for his return. And then, only this afternoon, I felt that impulse to come and look at you from

the stalls. Although I am an old man and devoted to my profession, Miss Cluley, I go sometimes into the world. I frequent my club. I know quite well that people never quite understood Jermyn's marriage. There are some who say now that though he married Lucille, he loved Sybil Cluley, and they ask themselves why."

"Do you know why?" Sybil asked.

"I do not," Sir James answered, "but I do know this — that unless Jermyn treats his wife differently, she will die."

Sybil shuddered. Her fingers played for a moment with some of the appliances stretched out on the dressing-table by which she was sitting.

"So you came to me," she said. "That seems so strange."

"And to me," he replied, "after I had seen you, it seemed so natural."

"I will give you confidence for confidence," Sybil declared quietly. "I will tell you a secret known only to three people in the world. I was engaged to marry Sir Jermyn Annerley. I loved him and he cared for me. His present wife took him from me by a scandalous trick. Jermyn discovered it only an hour or so after his wedding."

"So that is the story," the physician murmured. "You have given me the clew now to what has puzzled me so much. I was right, then, in my surmise. It is for your sake that Jermyn keeps his wife at arm's length."

"The wife who deceived him," Sybil interposed; "the wife who tricked him into a marriage he never desired."

Sir James rose to his feet and came over to the side of the chair where Sybil was sitting. He took her hand for a moment in his.

"Dear Miss Cluley," he said, "I think now that I understand. It is a very sad position. Lucille is breaking her heart. Jermyn is suffering. You, too, I am sure, are suffering. Don't you think it would be a great thing if one of you were to set the others free?"

"I do not understand."

"Ah, but I think you must understand! Think! The key of the whole situation is in your hands. What was it you said, set somewhere in the midst of those wonderful sentences of yours an hour ago? 'Self-sacrifice is the major note of love, around which the women of all ages have entwined their fluttering souls.' Send him away, Miss Cluley. In time he will be the happier for it; you will have saved her life. Think, for a moment, what can happen if you go on as you are going now. Think! Is there any possible outlet? Is there any hope? Can you, when the time comes, place your hand in Jermyn's with the ghost of his dead wife haunting you?"

The call-boy's shrill voice was heard down the corridor.

"Curtain going up on the last act. Mr. James Rawson, Miss Ellen Sinclair."

Sir James rose to his feet. Sybil shook her head.

"I have still a few minutes," she said. "Is this indeed an impulse of yours, Sir James?"

"It is entirely an impulse," he assured her.

"Supposing I accept that truism of yours, supposing I admit that self-sacrifice is the major part of

love? There are two of us women. Why should not she give him up? He belongs to me, he loves me. He has known her all her life but never dreamed of marrying her. He has no real love for her. Is it a good thing to force him into the arms of a woman whom he does not love? Is that morality?"

"Ah, my dear," Sir James answered, "I fear that you have come up against the walls of something very old-fashioned, something very primitive, but which, so far as I am concerned, I can never lose sight of — she is his wife, you are not."

"His wife by a trick!" Sybil cried passionately. "She stole him — deliberately stole him! She lied!"

"Even then they have stood together in church, they are man and wife," he insisted. "I know that people to-day are inclined to think more of circumstances and less of sacraments. You will think, of course, that I am a Philistine. I suppose I am. But there are certain conditions of life which seem to me to belong to the inevitable order of things. There isn't any honorable way, there hasn't been any evolved out of the brain of man throughout all the ages, by which a human being can rid himself of these obligations, however they come about. She is his wife. She can take from no other man what it is his duty to give."

Once more they heard the call-boy, outside the door this time.

"Call for Miss Cluley."

She was on her feet, peering into the looking-glass. Sir James held out his hand.

"Will you shake hands with me, Miss Cluley?" he begged. "I do not ask for any answer from you; I do not ask, even, for any expression of opinion. I

only ask you just to think over what I have said and to believe that, coming from a man who is over seventy years of age, they come at least, these words of mine, without impertinence. Good-by!"

She was busy with her make-up. She held out her hand but she did not look from the glass. He passed quietly out to find the manager waiting at the corner of the corridor. As they turned away, he heard once more the thunder upon her door.

"Second call for Miss Cluley!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

Mrs. Levenden was on the point of becoming irritable. She remembered, however, her husband's final injunction and she refused to discontinue her entreaties.

"But, my dear Sybil," she protested, "we all know, of course, that you prefer to live an extraordinarily quiet life, but there are just one or two occasions, as Harry was saying, when you really owe it to the theatre to show yourself a little. This Artist's Ball is going to be quite the biggest thing of its sort that has ever been attempted. We do want the *Imperial* to be well represented. Lord Lakenham is giving us all supper and has taken the best box in the place. He doesn't seem to care what he does so long as you come."

"It gives me no pleasure to go to that sort of thing," Sybil replied. "I am sorry but that is really the truth. I wrote and told Lord Lakenham so this morning."

"It's for charity," Mrs. Levenden persisted.

Sybil smiled.

"Most of these things are. If a subscription —"

Mrs. Levenden made a face at her.

"Bother your subscriptions! You know very well that is not what we want. Now be a dear girl and change your mind — just for my sake and Harry's," she added.

"Where is the supper to be?" Sybil asked.

"At the *Milan*. Lord Lakenham has taken the great centre table there and is going to have some wonderful decorations. He has invited every one of the company, Harry and myself, and a few more theatrical people."

Sybil sighed.

"Dear Mrs. Levenden," she begged, "please don't bother about me. I really shan't be missed in all that company."

"Won't you!" Mrs. Levenden answered, gloomily. "It's just to get you there that young Lakenham has been making all this fuss."

"I have already written and told him that I cannot come," Sybil reminded her.

"Of course you have," Mrs. Levenden agreed. "Isn't that why I am here? I never saw any one so disappointed in all my life. You did give him a half promise, you know."

"I didn't know that it was going to be a big affair like this," Sybil protested. "I hadn't any idea —"

She stopped short, the interruption which came was so sudden and so altogether unexpected. The door of the room had been quietly opened, unheard by either of them. Sybil's maid was announcing a visitor.

"Lady Annerley!"

Lucille had entirely the air of a casual caller. She shook hands with Sybil and had established herself in an easy-chair before either of the two women had realized exactly what was happening. Then Mrs. Levenden completed in somewhat hurried fashion her farewells.

"All I can say, Sybil, is that I hope you'll think better of it," she declared. "I shall perhaps see you

at the theatre. Harry wants me to come up, if I can, and have supper with some people. Good-by!"

Mrs. Levenden departed, leaving behind her a faint atmosphere of patchouli and powder. Sybil, who had walked with her visitor to the door, chiefly with the object of gaining a few seconds' time, came slowly back. Lucille waited until the door was closed before she spoke.

"I imagine," she began, "that I am an unexpected visitor."

"I did not expect to see you here," Sybil admitted, without attempting to sit down, "now or at any time. I cannot imagine why you have come. Do you mind telling me?"

"I have come," Lucille replied, "because I want something from you."

"You want something from me?" Sybil repeated.

Lucille nodded. She leaned forward in her chair. She was rather wonderfully dressed in a white velvet gown, and notwithstanding the somewhat advanced spring, she was almost smothered in ermine. Sybil's uncurtained room was, without doubt, trying for her. The sunshine shone fully in upon her pale face and thin features. Sybil was conscious of a little shock. Though her visitor was still beautiful, there was something almost startling in the transparency of her skin, the brilliancy of her long, luminous eyes.

"I want my husband," Lucille said slowly.

"Your husband?"

"I suppose he is mine although I stole him," Lucille continued lightly, unfastening her furs. "We can't go against facts, can we? On paper I won; in reality, you and I both know that I lost."

Sybil was beginning to tremble. Somehow or other, she felt herself no match for this self-possessed, determined woman, who seemed to speak so easily and without even a quiver in her tone of this tragedy which lay between them.

"I don't think that I can discuss this," Sybil said. "I wish that you had not come. I wish that you would go away."

"Naturally," Lucille answered, smoothly. "Ours could scarcely be a pleasant meeting, could it? It took me a long time to make up my mind to come. Now I am here, well, I am going through with it."

"You are going through with what?" Sybil demanded.

"My prayer to you," Lucille told her swiftly. "Can't you see that I have come a suppliant? I want my husband."

"Is he mine to give?"

"Entirely, if you choose. I staked a good deal on my vanity. I thought that if I once won him nominally, I should succeed in the rest afterwards. You see, men have rather spoiled me. I shall never be vain again! Jermyn has broken my spirit. I have failed. We have lived together all these months as strangers. I have tried everything. This is the last resource. Look at me — I am dying of it. I don't exactly ask for your pity, but for Heaven's sake, girl, think! Won't any other man do?"

"How could any other man do for me?" Sybil asked. "I love Jermyn. Why should you ask me such an abominable question? Why not another man yourself?"

"Because I love him, too," Lucille replied simply.

"Can't you see that I have come a suppliant? I want my husband." *Page 322.*

"We can't both succeed — reputably. I happen to be in possession."

"He was mine before you took him away," Sybil protested.

"I had loved him for four years," Lucille declared, "before you came upon the scene. Never mind that. It's too absurd for us to sit here and bandy words like two schoolgirls. I have come to plead, not to argue. Will you make a bargain with me?"

"What sort of bargain could there be?"

"Send him away for a year or two. Go to America — I see the papers are all talking about a wonderful offer you have had from New York. Let me have him for three years. Three years will soon pass. You will be on the right side of thirty then unless the newspapers all lie about your age."

"Are you talking seriously?" Sybil demanded. "If so, I cannot think how you could bring yourself to make such a preposterous suggestion. I have not the power to send Jermyn back to you, any more than it would be possible for you to give him up when the three years have passed. It is absurd. You talk as though we were living in the Fiji Islands."

Lucille once more leaned a little forward in her chair. Her eyes were fixed upon Sybil's. She spoke slowly and her words seemed somehow to have become charged with a certain mystic quality, so that they brought with them neither offense nor wonder.

"Are you Jermyn's mistress?"

"I am not," Sybil answered.

Lucille's fingers touched her throat for a moment. When she continued, however, her voice was quite calm.

"Somehow, I believed that," she said. "I don't

understand it — I don't understand that sort of affection. I don't understand what sort of a woman you can be, but I believed it. You can never be happy, then, unless you are his wife. Why doesn't my offer appeal to you? It seems to me to be your only chance. In three years he shall be yours. Don't ask me how — I promise it."

"You cannot promise anything of the sort," Sybil declared. "It is an absurdity. Besides, do you think that anything in the future could recompense for those three years? Why should I voluntarily give up the friendship which is the only joy in my life, a friendship which both he and I have accepted as the next best thing? Will you tell me one single reason why I should do this?"

"Because you are what I am not — good," Lucille replied swiftly. "Oh, I am in earnest! I don't value such goodness as yours very much because, after all, it is a matter of temperament, but I haven't the least doubt it's there. You've too many virtues to be ever really feminine. Look at me. I am dying, simply because I love him uncontrollably and because he won't touch me or look at me. The same roof shelters us at night. For months I have not slept. He sleeps in the next room. I hear him come to bed, I hear him get up. We sometimes lunch or dine together, we meet on the stairs, we drive to dinner-parties or any other sort of entertainment, and return together. He greets me and parts from me in the same manner; his speech of greeting or farewell is in the same tone. Try and imagine what it is like yourself. But then you couldn't — you could never care as I care."

"Do you think not?" Sybil murmured.

"Perhaps I am wrong," Lucille continued. "Mine is the love of the tigress. Perhaps in time I should tire of him. But while I live — while I live it is torture! He gives me not a word, not a look. Sometimes I have cried and sobbed all night. The very tissues of my body are wearing away. I lie awake and I ache, my heart aches, for the touch of his fingers, for even a sight of him. Some days I am so weak that I can scarcely crawl about. One would think that he could see it, that for pity's own sake he would pretend. He never does. There's nothing so cruel in life as the man who doesn't care can be to the woman who does. . . . I went to a doctor the other day. He told me that there was nothing the matter with me. I could have laughed when I came away!"

"Sir James Bondman is your doctor, is he not?" Sybil asked quietly.

Lucille glanced across at her.

"Why do you ask that? Yes, he is my doctor. Nothing the matter with me — that is what he said! And I know — I know that my heart is breaking. Have you ever thought of death, Miss Cluley? No, you needn't trouble to answer me. It doesn't really matter. Of course you've thought of it! Only I wish I could make you realize what a horrible dread one can feel of death when one has never for one second been happy in lifetime. I said just now three years. If Jermyn were mine for one week, I could meet death more bravely. But to feel yourself growing weaker and weaker, to feel yourself getting worn out and old, and all the time that hunger gnawing at your heartstrings — that's what I am going through, day by day! There isn't any ranting Calvinist with the gift of tongues who

could picture Hell to an hysterical audience, as I am feeling it. You see, I am not trying to excuse myself. I am not trying to tell you that I am sorry — I don't know that I am. But I am in such a state that I can't bear it any longer. You have a career, you're only a child yet. This state of things can't be the happiest for you. Give me my three years. A little suffering won't do you any harm. It's the best way out."

Sybil buried her head in her hands. For a moment her visitor's face had looked positively ghastly. Lucille was leaning back now, as though exhausted. There was a silence, curiously prolonged. Lucille showed no signs of impatience. Sybil was living through a little Hell of her own. At last she raised her head.

"Even if I were willing," she said slowly, "I do not see that anything which I could do would help you. You know very well that Jermyn is not the sort of man you can tell things to and give him no reasons. We have made our wonderful compact. If I were to tell him to-morrow that I desired to break it, he would never agree; he would insist upon explanations."

Lucille leaned eagerly forward.

"You can drift away from him," she cried, speaking quickly and in a harsh, dry tone. "You know his prejudices. You can mix for a little time with those people he hates. Mind, you are living an unnatural life. Let him see that you feel it. Accept this invitation to America. Afterwards, he will understand. I will see that he shall understand. Does this hurt? Do you hate the thought of it? Think of what I have been through before I came here! I have been called a proud woman. Here I am, groveling at your feet,

pleading with you. Did any woman before ever stoop so low, I wonder? It isn't only my life; it's the other part of myself, the part we don't understand — it's my soul. I could die once and die quickly, as bravely as any one, but I can't die like this, unblessed, with the great hunger in my heart. I have a horrible feeling that I couldn't rest — anywhere. There couldn't be a grave dug deep enough to hold me."

Sybil moved suddenly to the bell. She stood there with her finger upon it.

"You had better go away, please, at once," she begged. "I daresay that I shall do as you ask. I cannot tell. I only know that I want you to go away now. You have said everything that could be said. If I do it — if I do it, mind — I don't want you to come near me or to thank me. If you do —"

She stopped short. Her teeth were clenched. Sybil herself, for a moment, had the look of a tigress in her eyes.

"I think that I understand," Lucille said, rising to her feet. "In any case, you are right — I can say no more."

The maid had already opened the door. Lucille passed out with a little nod. Sybil stood motionless, listening to the opening and closing of the front door, the rattle of the lift below. Then she turned slowly to the telephone and rang up Mrs. Levenden's house in Hampstead.

"Tell Mrs. Levenden," she directed the servant who answered it, "when she returns, that Miss Cluley has rung up. Say that Miss Cluley has changed her mind and will be glad to go to the ball. She will see about her costume at once."

CHAPTER XXXIX

Jermyn arrived at St. Pancras about eight o'clock a few evenings later, after a week's stay in Scotland. He drove at once to his club and stared a little blankly at the handful of letters which the hall-porter handed him in reply to his eager inquiry. There was not a line from Sybil. He looked them through once more and turned somewhat aimlessly towards the smoking-room. Coming out, he almost ran into Sir James. The latter stopped at once.

"Just back from Scotland?" he inquired.

"This minute," Jermyn replied.

Sir James looked at the little pile of letters which Jermyn was carrying.

"You will find two notes there from me," he remarked.

Jermyn glanced down at them.

"Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Nothing at all. I simply invited you to lunch. There was a little matter I felt I should like to discuss with you."

"What about now?" Jermyn asked. "Have you dined yet?"

"Just on my way to order a sole and cutlet," Sir James declared. "Come and join me."

"I'll wash my hands and be there in five minutes," Jermyn agreed. "I had better telephone home, too."

"You haven't been home yet, then?"

Jermyn shook his head.

"I sent my man on with the luggage and came straight here," he explained. "Order something for me, will you — just the same as you are having. I am not hungry. I have been in the train all day."

He went to the telephone and made a few casual inquiries. Lady Annerley, the servant who answered the telephone believed, was dining out. The car was ordered for a quarter past eight.

"You will let her ladyship know that I have returned," Jermyn instructed. "I shall probably be here for some time."

He made his way to the dining-room and sat down to dinner with the physician. They talked for a while on casual topics. Then Sir James began slowly to draw near the subject which was all the time in his mind.

"I went, a few nights ago, Jermyn," he said, "to the Imperial Theatre. I knew your play was good but I didn't expect to enjoy it so much. Not only is the play good but I tell you frankly I think that Miss Cluley is a perfectly marvelous actress."

For the first time Jermyn smiled.

"She is quite wonderful," he admitted. "I am glad you went. I know you're not much of a playgoer."

"I am not," Sir James confessed. "I used to enjoy the old-fashioned sort of thing, but science makes so many demands upon us, nowadays, that one has very little time of any sort for diversion. Besides, I don't like the modern play. I am sick of seeing everything from the French. It isn't wholesome. In fact, there are many phases of modern life, Jermyn, which don't

please an old stager like myself. I am going to talk to you about one for a minute or two now, if I may."

Jermyn looked up in some surprise.

"Go ahead, by all means," he said. "You provoke my curiosity."

"Your wife has consulted me about her health."

Jermyn's face altered slightly. It was noticeable that his expression had hardened.

"I have not heard that she has been unwell," he remarked.

"She is not unwell," his companion pronounced, bluntly. "She is only dying."

Jermyn set down the glass which he had been in the act of raising to his lips. His hands were trembling. The physician had certainly produced his effect.

"Are you serious, Sir James?"

"Is it a matter to discuss in any other spirit? Your wife hasn't an unsound organ in her body and yet she is dying."

"What is the matter with her, then?"

"You," the physician replied, gravely.

There was a brief silence. Then Jermyn laughed a little hardly.

"If you were a modern practitioner, my friend," he said, "I am afraid I should look upon this as something of a dodge."

"You can call it what you like," the other declared. "You know very well that I hate all quackery and that I am not given to sensational speeches. I am fond of you, young man, and I am fond of your wife. I tell you frankly that there is a wasting process going on inside Lucille, against which science is of no avail. She is fretting herself into the grave. I had to ask her

questions. I asked them professionally and she answered professionally, but they tell the story, you know."

The conversation between the two men was interrupted for a time by the service of dinner and by the passing through the room of some friends. It was Jermyn who recommenced it.

"Doctor," he said, "I have never looked upon you as given to exaggeration, and I am not accusing you of it now, but are you sure that you quite understand Lucille? She is very excitable and nervous and highly strung. She came to you in one of her moments of depression. You might very easily form an idea of her condition which was a little misleading."

Sir James poured himself out a glass of wine.

"I brought Lucille into the world," he continued. "I attended her throughout her girlhood. I traveled over to France to see her when she had typhoid. I do not believe that she has ever voluntarily consulted another doctor. She has been like one of my own children to me. Everything that I have told you is the truth and more than the truth. I speak, of course, in complete ignorance of any circumstances there may be between you to explain what, on the face of it, seems so strange. I can only deal with facts. Lucille is dying. She will die if you do not save her. It is my duty to tell you this."

Curiously enough, after the first shock, Jermyn's succeeding impulse was one of anger.

"Look here, Doctor," he said, "supposing there was a cause of offense between my wife and myself, so great that, however strange it may seem to you, there was dishonor in my even simulating an affection for her

which I could not feel, do you still sit there and tell me that her state of health is my responsibility?"

"I am a doctor and not a philosopher," Sir James remarked, dryly. "Honor and dishonor I do not understand — not the modern view of them, at any rate. The position of husband and wife has been the same since the world was made, and always will be, although the present generation seems to do nothing but kick at it. You may alter schools of thought, you may build up new standards, establish new cults and new sects, but you can't do away with the obligations of the marriage ceremony. I don't wish to know anything more than I do know. It is my duty to point out your responsibility, and to my thinking, at any rate, there isn't anything in this world which could absolve you if Lucille dies without your making an effort to save her. . . . Shall we take our coffee outside? I am going on to a meeting at the hospital."

Jermyn waved him away.

"I'd rather you went," he said simply. "I want to think."

Sir James rose from his place and for a moment let his arm rest upon Jermyn's shoulder.

"I am an old fool, I suppose," he declared, "but, Jermyn, there's only one way out of a tangle, and there isn't any one who can show it you so well as you can find it out for yourself, if you'll only be honest."

Jermyn, a little later on, found a secluded corner in the reading-room and threw himself into an easy-chair. A crowd of hateful thoughts were pressing in upon him. There were things which he was forced to admit. Since the day of his marriage, it had been a changed Lucille who had lived like a shadow at his side. Even as he

sat there, he could think of a hundred cases of his brutality towards her. He had told himself that he was simply being consistent. He had promised nothing; he had nothing to give. He followed their tour, in his thoughts, from city to city, and back again to England. It was a changed Lucille, indeed. He had watched her grow quieter and quieter. He remembered — his heart ached with a dull pain when he remembered the many times when she had made those timid appeals to him; the imploring light of her eyes, the small artifices she had used, the half-frightened entreaties for just a little tenderness, a word, a touch, even, of his fingers.

The night before he had left for Scotland — he thought of it now almost with fear, he had lain awake in his room and he had heard a strange sound. He had crept to the keyhole of the communicating door, which as yet he had never unlocked, and listened. He seemed to hear the sound now again in the silence which reigned around him — the sound of a woman moaning and sobbing quietly through the hours of the night! . . . This was a new and a terrible thing which had come into his life, a new tragedy which he had no idea, at the moment, how to face!

The time slipped away. He rose at last a little wearily and made his way round to the theatre. The performance was just over and he met Mr. Levenden in the passage by the door-keeper's office. He fancied that the latter seemed none too pleased to see him.

"You back, Sir Jermyn?" the manager exclaimed. "By Jove, I wish I'd known that you were going to be in town! We've a small supper party on to-night. Couldn't you get off home," he added, glancing at Jermyn's attire, "and change and join us later?"

"Not to-night, I am afraid," Jermyn replied; "thank you all the same. I have been traveling all day. Miss Cluley hasn't left, I hope?"

"No, I think she is just prinking up," Mr. Levenden told him. "She is supping with us."

Jermyn stopped short.

"Supping with you?" he repeated.

"My wife and I both think," Mr. Levenden continued, "that Miss Cluley has been living much too secluded a life. I am thankful to say that she is beginning to break through it just a little. She is coming to the Artists' Ball to-morrow. Young Lord Lakenham is giving a great supper party. A connection of yours, by the way, isn't he, Sir Jermyn? You ought to come. A writer ought to see all sides of life, you know."

Jermyn turned slowly round.

"If Miss Cluley is going out to supper," he said, "I won't wait now."

"She'll like to see you for a moment, I expect," the manager remarked. "Perhaps she'll be able to persuade you to join us."

Jermyn hesitated. It was a queer little world which seemed crumbling about his ears.

"No, I won't bother her now," he decided. "I shall see her to-morrow, sometime."

Jermyn passed out, just managing to escape Gerald, who was alighting from his car outside. He jumped into a taxi and drove home.

"Your mistress in?" he inquired mechanically of Roberts, as the latter relieved him of his hat and overcoat.

"Her ladyship has not been out this evening, Sir Jermyn," the butler informed him. "She was dining

at Dorington House and was on the point of starting when she felt unwell. It was just after you had telephoned from the club, sir. She has been alone in her boudoir all the evening. I believe she is there now, sir."

Jermyn slowly ascended the stairs and knocked at the door of the end room of Lucille's little suite. There was no answer. He turned the handle softly and entered. Lucille was lying on a couch in a white dressing-gown. There were some smelling salts, the evening paper, a novel and a bowl of roses on a small table by her side. He closed the door quietly and came further into the room. Then he saw that she was asleep. He stood with his feet buried in the thick fur of the white rug, looking down at her. A curious little pain pulled at his heartstrings. He was conscious of a new feeling with regard to her, a sense of immense, almost infinite pity. Even in repose, her face was so absolutely the face of a tortured woman. There were lines under her eyes, hollows in her cheeks; her neck, too, had grown thinner. She was beautiful still, but in a queer, unearthly sort of fashion. Suddenly she opened her eyes and saw him. It was as though a miracle had taken place. Her whole appearance was transformed. Her face seemed to fill out, her eyes to soften. She grew at once younger.

"Jermyn!" she cried. "You here? Has anything happened?"

He came and sat at the end of the sofa. Perhaps something of that expression with which he had been gazing down upon her, had already vanished from his face, for her first wild impulse of joy showed signs of passing away.

"Nothing at all," he answered. "Roberts told me

just now that you were not well and I looked in for a moment to see what was the matter. It is nothing serious, I trust?"

She looked at him very wistfully for a brief space of time before she replied.

"No, it is nothing serious," she assured him, with a little sigh. "I sleep badly. Just as I was going out to-night, I felt a trifle faint. I am weary of these dinners, Jermyn — so weary of them. To-night I felt that I couldn't stand it. I came up here and lay down and I must have dropped off to sleep, and when I opened my eyes and saw you, I thought that it was a dream. You seemed different, somehow."

The disappointment in her voice was pathetic. He held out his hand and took hers. Again the light leaped up. It was the first time he had voluntarily touched her since their marriage.

"I am sorry that you don't sleep," he said. "Perhaps we had better go down to Annerley a little earlier than we had intended. It has been a long season this year and you've been doing a great deal."

"Yes," she murmured, still looking at him intently. "I am very tired of London. I am tired of doing things. I think that I should like it at Annerley."

"Have you had any dinner?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I am going to have some biscuits and milk. Won't you," she added, timidly, "have a whisky-and-soda or something? Will you touch the bell?"

He obeyed.

"I will have a whisky-and-soda here, if I may, instead of going downstairs again," he decided.

"Do you know that it is the first time we have ever

sat in here together, Jermyn?" she remarked presently. "And I am not looking a bit at my best. If only I had known that you'd been coming!"

"My dear Lucille," he said, smiling, "what outrageous vanity! You are wearing white, your best color, aren't you, and I am sure your white silk stockings are unexceptionable. Tell me, have you done anything amusing while I was away?"

"Amusing!" she repeated. "I am afraid that just now I don't find anything in life amusing. You see, Jermyn, I have made rather a mess of things," she went on. "We women are gamblers, you know. I wanted one thing so much that I staked everything in life upon it, and I lost. There doesn't seem to be anything much left."

Jermyn looked away into the fire. Was this a new battle which he was called upon to fight — a battle, too, of confused issues? Was he losing his strength? There was certainly something suspiciously like a lump in his throat.

"I am sorry to find you so depressed, Lucille," he said. "Perhaps —"

"Well?"

"If there is anything I could do," he concluded, a little lamely.

She burst into a fit of laughter, laughter which sounded at first genuinely mirthful but which ended in a little choke.

"Oh! Jermyn, Jermyn," she cried, wiping the tears from her eyes, "bless you for that! I think that I should have had hysterics in five minutes. That laugh has saved my life! No, dear, there's nothing you could do, of course. What could you? It's nice of you to come and sit with me. Come oftener, won't you? I am

still a very old-fashioned person, you know, who would like to see just a little more of her husband."

She gave him her hand. He hesitated for a moment and then raised it to his lips. It was as cold as ice. Her eyes had fallen before his but he could see that she was shaking.

"I will certainly try and see something more of you," he promised. "If you are doing nothing to-morrow, will you lunch with me?"

"Of course," she replied. "It gives me just the excuse I was longing for to throw over a terribly dull luncheon with the Chalcotes. I can at least offer them something novel in the way of apologies — I am engaged to lunch with my husband! Excellent! Sleep well, Jermyn. You must be tired after your journey. Will you send my woman along? Knock at the door on your left as you go by."

Jermyn sat for some time in his own room, before the open window. It faced eastward, and the view of the city by night, with its gradually dying glamour of sounds, always fascinated him. It was an hour or so later before he prepared for bed. He heard Lucille's maid depart, after wishing her mistress good night. Sometime afterwards he moved softly towards the connecting door, drawn there by some strange, disturbing apprehension which he could not altogether control. He listened painfully, his fingers digging into his flesh. There was the same sound, only this time so low that it was hard to distinguish it even from where he stood — the smothered sound of a woman crying softly to herself. When he stood up at last, his own eyes were hot. He walked back to the window. The new battle had indeed begun!

CHAPTER XL

Jermyn lunched next day with Lucille at the *Ritz*. She was gayer and in better spirits than she had been for some time, and she gave him a delightful account in her perfect French of two plays which she had seen in Paris during the last few days.

"Flo and I really went over to buy hats," she told him, "but they were all hideous. The theatres, though, were wonderful. Sometimes I think that you rather neglect Paris, Jermyn."

"I am afraid I do," he confessed, with real regret. "It does seem so hard to crowd everything into life."

"Fortunately, life is a sort of expanding quality. It becomes a different thing, something more or something less, for every one of us," she remarked. "To our neighbor on the right, for instance, it means as many lunches and dinners as he can consume without injury to his digestion. And to — why, there's Gerald!"

Jermyn's face suddenly darkened. Gerald, looking very smart and handsome, was showing Sybil to a little table which had been reserved for them. She saw Jermyn and for a moment she stood still. Then she nodded brightly and took the seat with her back towards them.

"Miss Cluley looks as charming as ever," Lucille declared. "I see in the paper this morning that she is

going to the Artists' Ball to-night in the costume she wore in her first success — 'Nilitska,' the dancing girl, wasn't it?"

"I believe so," Jermyn answered, a little absently.

"An excellent thing for Gerald," Lucille continued, trifling with her salad, "to have so charming a young lady to pilot him through the realms of Bohemia. None of these young men, nowadays, I suppose, are content unless they are seen somewhere with an actress, and Miss Cluley is so wonderfully superior."

"Need we discuss her?" Jermyn interrupted, irritably.

"Why should we?" Lucille smiled. "I suppose you know that Maeterlinck is in London? I am going to meet him this afternoon. Will you come, or is all your time fully occupied?"

"I should like to come very much, if it isn't too late," Jermyn replied. "You are going to the professor's, I suppose?"

She assented.

"I am going very early, as it happens," she told him. "Amy asked me to go before the others, and you know you're always welcome. Dear me, this place is becoming like a club!"

She leaned over to talk to some passers-by. Something of the same sort happened every few minutes. On their way out, Lucille was swept away with a crowd of acquaintances. Jermyn made his way over to the table where Sybil and Gerald were sitting.

"Shall I find you at home this afternoon, Sybil?" he inquired simply.

"I am afraid not," she answered. "I have promised to go for a short motor ride with Lord Lakenham, and

then I must have my costume for the ball tried on. To-morrow, if I still exist, or the next day."

Jermyn was puzzled. She met his gaze quite frankly but there was something different. He exchanged a few more ordinary sentences and turned away.

"Why don't you come to my supper party, sir?" Gerald asked him. "Miss Cluley is going to be our bright particular star."

"I am afraid," Jermyn replied, a little hesitatingly, "that that sort of thing is scarcely in my line."

"Have a try, for once," Gerald begged. "You'll find it lots of fun. The *Milan* at twelve o'clock. They've got an extension."

"Thank you," Jermyn said. "May I think it over?"

"You can think it over, but I shall book you," Gerald insisted. "It's going to be one of the sights of the year."

Jermyn rejoined his wife, paid the visit with her which she had suggested, and afterwards wandered restlessly back to his club. Lucille was dining out alone that night — the date of his return from Scotland had been uncertain and she had accepted no invitations for him during the week. He entered the house just as she was leaving. She paused, for a moment, in the hall, a glittering vision of silver and gray.

"Paris," she remarked. "I had to go over to have it tried on. Such a nuisance — I'm inches thinner. What do you think of it?"

"Wonderful," Jermyn answered, truthfully enough. "It isn't a dress at all — it's an inspiration."

"How Monsieur Charles would love you!" she sighed. "It is almost his own remark. Personally, it makes me

feel like a mermaid. I have to feel the weight of my tiara to be quite sure that I am properly dressed."

She drew her cloak around her and passed out with a little nod. Jermyn's servant followed him upstairs.

"You will change now, sir," he asked, "or will you dine first?"

"I will change now," Jermyn decided. "A smoking jacket will do. I shall spend the evening at home."

He dined in the library, trifled with some new books, glanced through the reviews and the evening paper, wrote a couple of letters. Every now and then he found himself looking at the clock. He was conscious of an acute feeling of restlessness. There was something in his blood which he could not analyze; a vague unfamiliar sensation which he failed altogether to trace to its foundation. He thought continually of Sybil. There was something new between them, some quality in her tone when she spoke to him, something, even, in the frank way she laughed up into his face, which baffled him. He thought of their last parting, of the letters which he had written her. There was nothing which could possibly be misunderstood, yet something had happened. And all the time there was a background to his thoughts. There was Lucille! The book which he had been reading slipped from his fingers as he lounged in the chair, with his eyes fixed upon the smoldering fire. He went over his conversation with Sir James. One by one those sentences came back to his mind, so ponderously delivered, so weighty, so charged with an insistent, minatory meaning. Lucille's face as he had seen her asleep, the previous evening, haunted him. Somewhere in one of the smaller galleries of Florence he had seen a picture of an Italian

woman, a victim of the Inquisition, lying in her cell, fresh from the torture chamber, dreaming of the last night of terror. The memory came back to him. There was the same expression as he had seen in the curve of Lucille's lips — a woman in Hell! He moved restlessly in his place and, springing up, began to walk up and down the room. It was absurd, he told himself. His relations with these two women had been carefully thought out, with due regard to all the circumstances, with due regard to everything he owed them. Lucille was paying the price of her own wickedness and deceit. . . . Nevertheless, the restlessness grew. He kept glancing at the clock. At half-past eleven he could bear it no longer. He rang the bell.

"Parkes," he ordered, "put out my dress clothes at once. I am going to a dance."

He followed the man upstairs, presently. Just before midnight he was in the entrance hall of the *Milan*. He arrived there just as Gerald Lakenham drove up with Sybil by his side. Again Jermyn felt a queer little pang as he advanced to meet them.

"So you have really come!" she explained. "You astonish me!"

"Why not?" he answered. "You are here. To me, you know, that was almost as astonishing."

"Ah, no!" she objected. "Every one tells me that I ought to have been doing this sort of thing for a long time. It is my métier to be frivolous. It is scarcely yours, is it?"

Gerald was busy collecting his party and for these few minutes they were alone.

"Something has happened, Sybil," Jermyn said quietly.

She shrugged her shoulders. Her feet were keeping time to the music. She was wearing a wonderful gown, unlike anything he had ever seen on her before, and her maid was following behind with a little bag containing her domino and mask.

"Nothing has happened, dear Jermyn," she assured him, "only I think that I am growing to feel younger. I am afraid of gray hairs, sitting by myself and moping all day long. Don't you think I am wise?"

"But isn't it a little — sudden?" he asked.

"Ah! these changes are always sudden," she replied.

"It is a change, then?" he said swiftly. "Sybil, is anything changed between you and me?"

For a moment she was her old self.

"Not while the world lasts, dear one," she murmured. "And yet — and yet —"

"If you will only finish your sentence," he begged, "I feel that I shall have the answer to a little riddle which is puzzling me sorely."

"My sentence," she whispered, "is better unfinished. Now here comes everybody and I know you're going to hate it all."

Sybil's words were prophetic. Supper was served at a great round table in the middle of the restaurant. Jermyn was placed at some distance from Sybil, between Mrs. Levenden and an exceedingly lively young woman of American extraction, who was appearing in a popular musical comedy, and to whom he was apparently expected to devote himself. Jermyn had never heard the name of the show in which she was performing, and she had never heard of Jermyn. After the first few sentences, conversation fell flat.

It was, indeed, a rather difficult situation for him. Everybody called everybody else by their Christian names, and a peculiar sort of freemasonry seemed to exist between them all and to form the foundation for the conversation. Jermyn did his best at first to talk to his neighbors, but he found the task almost hopeless. They belonged to a different world and they spoke a different tongue. Even their manners were strange to him. As time went on, every one became riotously gay. Sybil, between Gerald and one of his particular cronies, was altogether the centre of attraction. Her laugh was continually heard. She talked with every one, she even whispered sometimes to Gerald. Gradually Jermyn began to feel as though he were a skeleton at the feast. Mrs. Levenden, who outside her intimate knowledge of the stage was rather a stupid woman, had given up trying to make conversation with him. The American beauty at his right was engaged now in a desperate flirtation with a young compatriot a few places away. Magnum after magnum of champagne had been opened; the table was hung with tobacco smoke. Several of the men, and even one or two of the girls, were making quite as much noise as was seemly. A *maître d'hôtel* had brought in a huge box of crackers, and Sybil, amidst applause, had placed upon her head a little *vivandière's* cap. Some one drank her health. She stood up and kissed her hands across the table to him. Suddenly, almost for the first time, she caught Jermyn's eye. For a single moment it seemed to him as though a mask had fallen from her face, as though her little glance was an imploring one, as though she were calling to him to take her away, that it was all a bad dream, that

some evil spirit had taken possession of her. Her message came to him with such convincing earnestness that he rose to his feet before he could realize what he was doing. Then, as swiftly as it had come, the look passed away. She was once more the gayest of those present, laughing with everybody, the presiding deity of the feast. When at last they rose, Jermyn with difficulty made his way to her side. Her face was a little flushed; she looked up at him, as he came, with a quiver almost of apprehension.

"Sybil," he pleaded, "don't go to this dance. Let me drive you home."

Again she seemed to hesitate; the mask slipped. Then Gerald came up and swept her away.

"You're in box number five, sir," he told Jermyn, "with Miss Cluley and me, but she's engaged to me for the ride down. We are going to try my new coupé. There are plenty of cars outside, if you haven't your own. We shall all meet in the vestibule."

Jermyn stood quite still and watched them pass him. He saw Gerald hand Sybil into the little coupé, which headed the procession of cars. She never looked back. As the coupé swept round the courtyard, however, on its way out, he fancied that he caught a gleam of a white face peering anxiously in his direction. He took a quick step forward. When it passed him again, however, his heart sank. It was surely a mask! Sybil was leaning back among the cushions, laughing heartily.

One or two of the others spoke to him, pointing out the cars which Gerald had engaged. Mrs. Levenden, indeed, seemed almost to expect his escort. Jermyn,

however, with a murmured word of excuse, managed to escape. He made his way out into the Strand and turned westwards.

Jermyn paused for a few moments on the steps of his club, but finally made his way directly homeward. It was solitude which he needed, solitude free from even the chance of unwelcome interruptions. He let himself in with a latchkey and met Roberts in the hall, carrying a small silver tray. The man came forward to assist him.

"Her ladyship, sir," Roberts announced, "is not feeling very well. I was taking her up some brandy."

Jermyn raised her eyebrows.

"Where is her maid?"

"Her ladyship found that Annette was suffering from neuralgia and sent her to bed early," the man explained. "I was just wondering, sir, whether it would be as well to have one of the other young women wakened."

"Where is her ladyship?" Jermyn asked.

"In her boudoir, sir," Roberts told him. "She only returned a few minutes ago."

"I will see whether any assistance is necessary," Jermyn said. "You can give me the tray."

Very slowly he mounted the stairs and knocked at the door of her sitting-room. Lucille was lying upon the couch, still fully dressed. She opened her eyes and turned her head a little wearily, but sprang up when she saw who it was.

"Jermyn!" she explained.

He set the tray down upon the table.

"I saw Roberts in the hall as I came in," he remarked, a little stiffly. "He told me that you were

not feeling well and that you had sent your maid to bed."

The color was gradually returning to her cheeks. She raised herself slightly upon the couch.

"It is very kind of you to come and inquire," she said. "May I have just a sip of that brandy? I am really quite all right now, though."

He handed her the tumbler.

"I felt just a little faint when I came in," she explained. "We played too much bridge after dinner, and the rooms were so close. Then I remembered that I had sent Annette to bed and it annoyed me. I am really quite all right now."

He stood by her side, looking down at her. She was still wearing her wonderful gown but she had removed her jewels, which were lying upon the table.

"Are you sure that you wouldn't care to have one of the parlor-maids sent for?" he asked. "Or I daresay that Annette is well enough to get up and help you now."

She shook her head.

"It really isn't necessary. I shall be able to manage for myself quite well. Sit down for a moment, won't you?"

She stretched out her hand and drew a low chair close to the side of the sofa. Then she glanced up at him and their eyes met.

"Please sit down," she begged.

He obeyed at once. She took his hand between hers.

"I am cold," she murmured. "I wonder why I am so cold."

"Finish the brandy," he advised.

She shrugged her shoulders and drank it.

"I want to talk," she said. "I think that that will do me good. Tell me where you have been?"

"To a supper party at the *Milan*."

"Amusing?"

"I am afraid I didn't find it so," he replied.

A queer little flicker of sympathy parted her lips. In a sense she realized that she was responsible for his depression. Then her thoughts wandered away again.

"Did you ever feel tired, too, Jermyn — so tired that every bone in your body ached, and your heart ached, and your eyes were hot, so hot and tired that sleep seemed an impossibility, so tired that you hadn't even the courage —"

She broke off abruptly in the middle of her sentence.

"Ah! but of course you don't feel like that," she continued, "and I don't want you to. It's stupid of me, isn't it, to be so dull just when you happen to have come in to see me. But I am tired to-night — I am so tired."

There was something intensely pitiful in her slowly uttered words, in the longing which she could not keep out of her face. Jermyn felt once more that little lump in his throat. Once more the hateful consciousness of his callous brutality seemed to seize hold of him, to stir in his consciousness and in his heart a multitude of surging emotions. He bent over her.

"Won't you let me —"

He stopped short.

"Won't I let you what?" she asked, a little breathlessly.

"Would you like me to carry you into your room?"

She held out her arms. Her smile was one of absolute self-yielding yet it had in it something of her old brilliancy. He lifted her up, amazed to find how light she was. Then he opened the door and passed into the inner chamber for the first time since their marriage."

"Put me down upon the bed, please," she begged. "I am going to rest there for a few minutes before I undress."

He obeyed her but her arms still held him, although her eyes were closed. Suddenly she opened them. Her fingers gripped his, holding him with amazing force. There was a light in her face unlike anything he had ever seen in his life.

"Jermyn!" she pleaded. "Jermyn!"

Her long arms were wound around him now with almost frantic force.

"One word," she faltered,—"one touch!"

The wave of pity reached his heart. He stooped and kissed her on the lips.

CHAPTER XLI

"For a two-year-older, you are much too exhausting for a hot morning," Jermyn declared, setting down his boy upon the stone balcony. "There, run along to nurse."

The child showed signs of objecting but his nurse quickly caught him up and disappeared. Jermyn remained, for a moment, looking out over the gardens, radiant now with all the perfumed perfection of spring flowers and foliage. There were beds of wonderful pink and white hyacinths, long borders of yellow crocuses, with patches of anemones and banks of daffodils. In a corner where the sunshine lingered longest, the early roses were breaking into blossom, and in the distance was a delicate cloud of pink and white blossom from the walled fruit garden. The master of Annerley drew a little sigh of content before he passed through the open windows into the small morning room, where breakfast was arranged at a round table drawn up close to the balcony.

"Her ladyship is not down yet?" he asked Roberts, who was standing at the sideboard.

"Not yet, sir," the man replied. "The gong has gone twice."

Jermyn shook out the letters from his post bag and ran them through at first carelessly enough. Then he stopped short. Even after three years, the sight of

Sybil's handwriting was not without its effect upon him. He glanced at the foreign postmark, with the name of the hotel on the outside of the envelope. Then he opened it almost eagerly and settled down to read it. It was dated from a town in the far west of America:

"*My dear Jermyn,*

"Your cables and letters of congratulation to Mary and Gerald have been more welcome than I can ever make you understand. They have made all the difference so far as I am concerned, and have taken quite a load off my mind. Knowing them both as well as I do, Jermyn, you can imagine what joy it gives me to realize absolutely their love for one another.

"We seem, somehow, at the other end of the world, but I cannot tell you how happy we all are. Gerald especially is delightful. He and Mary insist upon taking my whole tour with me. We have a private car and go from place to place, and really I think we all behave like a party of children. Gerald and Mary go sight-seeing at every opportunity and always come back with a wonderful account of their wanderings. I have, unfortunately, to spend a great deal of time in the theatre, as the audiences out here like plenty of variety, and we have to change our programme continually. I daresay you sometimes see the papers and you know that America has been much too kind to me. I have had heaps of offers to stay on here — well, nearly for the rest of my natural life; or my working life, at any rate. But we are all coming back directly this tour is finished.

"I am going to write you a longer letter in a few days. I want to write you more fully about Mary and Gerald. I do not think that you will blame me — I don't really see how anybody could. They are simply devoted to one another, and it is the greatest happiness imaginable to see

them together. You know what Mary has meant to me all my life, and you can imagine what it means now to think that my care of her is so delightfully rewarded. I am sure that Gerald's people, however they may feel just at first, cannot help loving her, in time.

"I am writing you in great haste for this mail, Jermyn, because half an hour ago I received a letter from your wife which puzzled me and has made me just a little uneasy. To explain it I must tell you something. Three years ago, in London, she paid me a visit which I daresay she has never told you about; there was, indeed, no necessity. You know how things were between us then; you know how things were between you and your wife. The situation seemed, perhaps, to us, the only possible one. In effect, I suppose, it was terribly unnatural and, so far as your wife was concerned, notwithstanding everything, terribly cruel. Because, you see, she really did care, in a different way from anything I ever imagined — in the most wonderful way. She really came to me that day, to put it very simply, to beg me to give you up. That was the great text of her coming, and some of the things which seemed to me of less account, slipped away from my mind until her letter recalled them. She asked me, Jermyn, to give you up for three years — to give her three years of happiness. After then, well, she just shrugged her shoulders, and, somehow or other, that part of what she said never seemed to me to have any great significance. But this morning, as I have told you, I had a letter from her. It was a very charming letter and she said many nice things, and I know from it that my sacrifice — you see, I am not hypocrite enough to pretend that it was not a sacrifice — has not been in vain, and that she has been happy. But the conclusion of her letter puzzled me. She spoke as though some definite epoch were over, as though there were some sort of bargain which she was preparing

to keep. While I was trying to think what she could mean, the memory of our interview all came back and I understood. I think, Jermyn, it was on the third day of May that she came to me. The three years would be just about up when you receive this letter. I will not tell you quite the thoughts which have come into my mind. They seem too absurd to set down with pen and ink. But will you watch over her very carefully for a little time? I have written her, also, and I expect and hope that what I have said will be enough.

"Mary sends her love and Gerald his remembrances. They are off for a three days' motor tour through some magnificent scenery. Will you write to me through the bank in New York? You know how glad I shall be to hear.

"Ever yours,

"Sybil."

Jermyn rose slowly to his feet. He glanced at the calendar which hung on the wall. It was the morning of May 3rd! He looked at the empty seat at his table, empty for the first time since they had been at Annerley, and a sudden paralyzing fear kept him, for a moment, motionless. Lucille was not like other women. She had strange ideas. And her word — her word was more, even, than a bond. In those few seconds during which he stood there, gazing through her empty place with transfixed eyes, he remembered a moment in the gardens on the previous night, a moment when her arms had stolen around his neck with a touch of that old feverish, terrified craving, and a shadow of hopelessness had gleamed once more in her strangely-lit eyes.

"Ah! Jermyn," she had whispered, "they have been wonderful, these three years!"

Three years! The three years were up that day! Lucille had mentioned the exact time. Jermyn left his letter lying upon his plate, opened the door and ran upstairs swiftly. On the landing he met Annette.

"Where is your mistress?" he asked quickly.

Annette answered in an undertone.

"Her ladyship had no sleep last night. She is just taking a sleeping draught and is going to lie down for a few hours. She wished particularly not to be disturbed."

Jermyn almost pushed her on one side. He hurried along the corridor and reached the door of his wife's room. He turned the handle — it was locked. In a moment he had passed on into his own sleeping apartment, rushed through it and tried the handle of the connecting door. That, too, was locked.

"Lucille!" he called out.

There was no answer. He took the handle in his hand and shook it.

"Lucille!" he repeated. "I must speak to you at once!"

Still there was no immediate answer and the sick fear was in his heart. He stepped back, his right shoulder squared for a charge. Then he heard his wife's voice. There seemed something unnatural about it, it seemed to come from a long way off, but it was her voice.

"What is it, Jermyn?"

"I must speak to you this instant," he declared hoarsely. "I must speak to you without a second's delay. Do you hear? Open the door, Lucille."

For a moment she did not reply. Then he heard the rustling of draperies within the room. She was coming towards him. The lock turned. He flung the

door open. She stood upon the threshold, gazing out upon him like a ghost. He sprang past her to the middle of the room. Then he gave a great sob of relief. On her table was a letter, written and addressed to him; by the side of it, a wineglass — full. He caught it up in his hand and dashed it upon the carpet. Then a sudden fit of weakness came to him. He sank into the chair where she had been writing.

"Jermyn!" she cried softly. "How did you know?"

He sat looking at the little stream of dark brown liquid and the fragments of the glass upon the carpet. The sight seemed to give him confidence. He rose and held out his arms. She came to him readily enough but her face was still very white and strained.

"Dear," she faltered, "it is my word — my word of honor."

He held her tightly and led her toward the window. Below, the nurse and child were playing. She turned away with a little shiver.

"Yes, I know, I know!" she sobbed. "But these three years, Jermyn! One could go down into Hell with the memory of these three years singing in one's heart."

He kept his arms about her tightly. With an effort he made his tone as matter-of-fact as possible.

"I think," he said, "that the best thing you can do is to read a letter I have received this morning, and afterwards to read another one which you will probably find for yourself in the post bag."

"From — her?"

He nodded.

"Will you wait here while I fetch them?" he asked.

"Yes!" she promised.

He hesitated. She smiled at him very pathetically.

"Jermyn dear, you can't think that I wanted to do it? I shall be very safe until you come back."

He went downstairs like a man in a dream and returned with the letters. He spread his own out upon the table before her, and, cutting the envelope of the one addressed to her, drew out the single sheet of closely written notepaper and placed it in her hands. She read them both, word by word. When she had finished, she was crying softly. They sat together at the open window. The west wind came to them from over the gardens. Every now and then there were peals of childish laughter.

"But, Jermyn," she whispered, "what about her?"

His fingers tightened upon her hand. He, too, was looking through the window, across the gardens, across the park, to the sky.

"There are two sorts of happiness, dear," he said.

THE END

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